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AN AUSTRALIAN HEROINE.



AN
AUSTRALIAN HEROINE.

BY
R. MURRAY PRIOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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AN AUSTRALIAN HEROINE.

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CHAPTER I.

FREDERICA TALMADGE.

UPON the morning following, Esther was taken by Cullen to a West End shop, where she was furnished with such a wardrobe, as the ladies'-maid considered suitable for a humble member of the Isherwood family, about to be sent to school.

Esther's position had been satisfactorily settled in the housekeeper's room the night before. It was decided that there must be something doubtful about her antecedents ; but loyalty to the family name shielded her from too scathing criticism, and demanded, that as Miss Isherwood, a certain amount of consideration should be awarded her. Cook, Parkins, and Cullen, who were, so to speak, members of the family, having been in Sir Emilius' service over fourteen years, took her

as it were, under their protection. They were all kind-hearted, and inclined to patronize and pity the neglected orphan; and the footman, who had tittered at Esther's embarrassment during dinner the previous evening, was severely rebuked by Parkins as not knowing his place, while Cullen administered a lecture to the housemaid, who had presumed to make a joke in the servants' hall upon the paucity of Miss Isherwood's wardrobe.

When she was fairly fitted out in a neat mourning costume, with a little black hat and well-fitting shoes and gloves, Esther looked a very different being to the draggled creature who had made an appearance in Berkeley Square the evening before. "Well, I declare, Miss," exclaimed Cullen, "you ain't the same young lady. Dress does make a difference, to be sure, and my Lady will be better pleased with you now that you have on a smarter gown. That was a disgrace—the one you have taken off—but I suppose there ain't no dress-makers in Australia. I said to my Lady last night, that you put me in mind of a picture of one of the Miss Isherwoods at Barwold. A picture by Sir Joshua, as they call him; and I see the likeness more than ever now. Your father was Sir Emilius' only brother, wasn't he, Miss? It's curious that I've never

heard him mentioned, long as I have been in the family."

"I did not know anything about the Isherwoods till I came to England yesterday," replied Esther, mindful of Sir Emilius' injunction, "and I can tell you nothing about my father."

"La ! that's curious," said Cullen. "I couldn't have believed that any one could be so ignorant of their own relations ; but hold up your back, Miss, and don't look as though you were ashamed of yourself. And as to behaving prettily, we'll stop at a bookseller's on our way home, and I'll buy you a little book that'll teach you company ways." But Esther, with an instinct she could hardly define, drew herself back a little, and did not accept Cullen's offer.

They made a little *détour* on their way back, for Cullen had taken a cab by the hour, and in an impulse of Cockney good-nature, proposed that she should show Esther something of the Metropolis. They drove home by the Thames Embankment, and Cullen pointed out the Houses of Parliament, and Buckingham Palace—"where the Queen lives, Miss, when she is in London"—and such other objects of interest as were patent to the ladies'-maid.

A detachment of the Guards was filing down St. James's Street, and Esther's heart gave a

violent bound as she realized that these were soldiers. In her ignorance she fancied that all regiments wore the same uniform ; and George was a soldier. She scanned each face as the troop went slowly by, but Brand was certainly not there. She put a few questions to Cullen as to military discipline, and the army generally, but received no satisfaction.

“Why, there aren’t such a many soldiers, Miss, except what are wanted to guard the royal family,” said Cullen, whose ideas on the subject were vague. “They’re down at Aldershot mostly, or scattered about the kingdom. But you are too young to be hankering after the red-coats ; and it’s not becoming in a young lady like you, to be asking questions about the officers, as though you were wanting to be a barrack flirt.”

Cullen gave a little sniff, which conveyed the intimation that of all despicable creatures a “barrack flirt” was the most to be reprobated. Esther, though she did not understand the term, accepted it, with a feeling of guilt, as a charge that might possibly be laid by a superior intelligence to herself. She felt herself in a world which could not be gauged by her past experiences, and stifled her longings, asking no further questions of remote reference to her lover.

Bernard Comyn did not visit Berkeley Square again during Esther's short stay there. As soon as her wardrobe was complete, she was dismissed with a valedictory admonition from Lady Isherwood to "learn to behave like other people." Sir Emilius patted her on the shoulder, saying, "Good-bye, my dear; good-bye; try and improve, and become less awkward; and bear in mind that there is no influence like that of art for refining the understanding." He placed a five-pound note in her hand; and then Esther, escorted by Parkins, was conveyed in a cab to Miss Binney's school for young ladies at Lower Norwood.

Bolingbroke House was a large stone mansion, standing in its own grounds a little off the street, and approached through entrance-gates, the pillars of which were surmounted by two huge pine-apples in plaster. "Bolingbroke House" was printed in neat letters above the bell-handle, and there was a shrubbery of dwarfed laurestinus and laurels in front, and a large walled-in garden at the back, where in summer the girls walked and read. It was a very genteel establishment, and contained about twenty pupils, ten of whom were boarders, and the rest day scholars. Some were of the same age as Esther, but most of them were considerably younger. They were all much

further advanced in knowledge, as was not surprising ; and a general titter ran down the classes when the new girl went through her preliminary examination, displaying a lamentable ignorance of the A B C of young-lady-like instruction, and was formally placed in the very lowest form, amongst girls of eleven and twelve.

Esther thought Miss Binney very like the old woman who couldn't drive her pig from market, in Rod's Book of Nursery Tales—with her sharp face and bright eyes, and the crimson tippet which she wore crossed over her shoulders. She always wore mittens too, and a mob-cab that completed the resemblance, but she could be very dignified upon occasions.

"Miss Isherwood," said the schoolmistress in her most impressive manner, "I am sorry to find that your education has been entirely neglected, and that you are deficient in the most elementary knowledge. For this I was somewhat prepared ; as your estimable uncle, Sir Emilius Isherwood, with whom I have long been acquainted, informed me that you had been brought up under singular disadvantages. You must all remember, young ladies," continued Miss Binney, addressing severely the row of tittering school-girls, "that Miss Isherwood's youth has been spent in a land where educational advantages are not easily obtainable,

and she is not to be blamed for having been deprived of those blessings which in England are so lightly prized. Young ladies of the third class, turn to your geography and your atlas; look out Australia or New Holland, and read the remarks which Stewart makes upon that lately-discovered continent. I am obliged, Miss Isherwood, to place you low down in the school; but if you are industrious, and desirous of self-improvement, you will soon repair your deficiencies by a diligent attention to your teachers, and by devoting all your spare time to the acquirement of knowledge. Miss Talmadge, I think Herr Stolzheim is waiting to give you your music lesson."

A tall fair girl, who had been looking intently at Esther, left the room, and Miss Binney turned away at the conclusion of her address, and began giving a dictation lesson. Red with shame, Esther took up her position in a class composed of hobbledehoy misses, who stared rudely at her, and whispered to each other with a degree of ill-breeding only possible in a set of English school-girls. Esther felt from that moment that they all hated and despised her, and shrank into herself, holding all her companions at a distance, and enduring agonies only to be appreciated by very shy, sensitive persons, who may at some period of their lives have found themselves in a similar

position. Every time they looked at her she fancied that they were holding her up to ridicule among themselves ; and when in their games they pushed roughly against her, or excluded her from participation in their school-girl pranks and jokes, she made up her mind that they disliked her because she was ignorant, and un-English, and did not understand their ways. Often in the darkness of the night, as she wept in sheer desolation in her little bed, she would tell herself that active ill-usage and menial tasks, were easier to be borne than this passive antipathy and ignoring of her existence.

Esther was remarkably intelligent, and her early experiences and close sympathy with nature, solitary and vast, always to her a living source of comfort, which these prim gardens and trimmed hedges could never be—had developed in her a susceptibility which under other circumstances might perhaps have been wanting. Externals impressed her readily, and yet she had a vigorous mind-life of which every one else was ignorant. She was burning to become as well informed as the girls around her. She wanted to train herself in order that she might in time be worthy of George.

She had her inner visions and enthusiastic longings which she could never utter. Some one

on board the 'Lass of Gowrie' had lent her the 'Mill on the Floss,' and when she had read of Maggie Tulliver and such like heroines, whose books had been to them a world of inspiratory delight, it had seemed an easy thing to learn. Now that she was confronted by the hard, mechanical routine of education—the stolid dulness of 'Murray's Grammar,' 'Colenso's Arithmetic,' 'Perrier's Fables,' the chronological intricacies of the early Saxon monarchies, and the first lines of French kings—knowledge seemed only a labyrinth of dry facts and inapprehensible dates, while the clue to beautiful inspiring thoughts appeared lost for ever.

Poor Esther! If she could have skimmed over the rudimentary fields! If Miss Binney had given her 'Plutarch's Lives,' and Bulwer's and Scott's historical novels, and had taught her mythology through the medium of 'Kingsley's Heroes' and the 'Earthly Paradise'—the clue might have been regained; but to attempt education in higher branches upon an inadequate elementary groundwork, was contrary to all the canons of the Bolingbroke House philosophy. And so Esther plodded on at 'Pinnock's England,' 'Mangnall's Questions,' 'Brewer's Guide to Science,' and such like approved text-books, making no perceptible advance to her goal. All the time she was

thinking to herself despairingly, "Oh! how can I ever fit myself to be Mr. Brand's wife? How can I expect him to love me, when I am more ignorant than these rude girls of twelve?—and what can I do to learn fast enough?" Bernard's words of hearty interest and encouragement would come to her often in the midst of her loveless tasks, and, without knowing why, her thoughts frequently recurred to him. She wished that she could see him again and ask him to help her.

She did as Miss Binney had desired, studying diligently in and out of school hours; and in the winter afternoons, when the others were amusing themselves over their wool-work or their story-books, cracking school-girl jokes, or drawing humorous caricatures of their governess, Esther would sit apart by the window, cudgelling her brains over a lesson in arithmetic or a page of French Grammar.

She was always fancying that her companions were laughing at her for her ignorance and unlikeness to themselves. In truth, though below them in the scale of actual knowledge, she was infinitely their superior as regards mental culture, that faculty that is independent of book-learning, and enables its possessor to intuitively select and enjoy the highest, in sensation, art, or litera-

ture. The jangling of their jokes grated on Esther's ear. Sometimes the book she was studying would drop from her fingers, and she would forget the schoolroom and its occupants. The wintry garden, and the straight street opposite, with its monotonous row of houses at which she had been vacantly staring, would vanish. She would be on the island again, standing against the lighthouse, with the sea-breeze lifting up her hair, and expanding her being; or in the garden at Bully Wallah, with the orange-blossoms dropping upon her head, or the Cape jessamine, that suggested thoughts of George, and of her love, scenting the air around her.

It seemed to her that in the days before she had known him, and in those following his departure, she had not been so lonely as she was now. Then, she had had the trees and the sea, and there had been no inquisitive, unsympathetic eyes to stare at her. If one of the girls would only make a friend of her, and seem to understand her! She was thirsting for love. The smallest expression of sympathy would have fallen upon her heart like dew upon a sun-baked desert; but she had that intense consciousness of solitude in the midst of a crowd, that is most painful of all—the hemmed-in, caged-up feeling, which, when she wept at night in her dormitory,

made her stifle her sobs lest they should be audible to her fellow-sleepers.

There was only one of Miss Binney's pupils who seemed to regard Esther with anything like interest, and even this was passive, and of a purely artistic nature. There was among the boarders a tall, fair girl—she who had been called off to her music-lesson at the time of Esther's introduction—with regular features and a pretty complexion, whose graceful figure carried elegantly her somewhat shabby gowns, and made every garment she wore appear well-fitting. She had a soft, composed way of speaking and looking, never laughed loudly, or was angular in her movements. Everything she attempted, she did mechanically well. She played beautifully upon the piano, and spoke languages with fluency. She was a favourite with every one, and Miss Binney held her up as a proof of the superiority of the Bolingbroke House mode of tuition. But she had evidently one absorbing interest, and this was her drawing-board. In her leisure moments when school was over, and the other girls were amusing themselves after their several inclinations, Frederica Talmadge was always seated with a pencil and paper before her, taking little sketches, or designing illustrations, and more than once she had made a furtive study of

Esther's head, as the girl pored over her lesson-books in the window. Esther had in her turn observed Frederica Talmadge, but with an admiring awe, longing to be noticed by her, but not daring to obtrude herself upon the attention of one who was so manifestly superior. Both the girls were shy, and Esther had, by her reticence, and the fact of her connection with the Isherwood family—a fact upon which Miss Binney laid great stress—quite unconsciously earned for herself the reputation of pride. Frederica was a weekly boarder, going home on Saturday and returning to Bolingbroke House on Monday; but Esther knew nothing about her except that she lived with an aunt at South Kensington, and that when she left Miss Binney's, she was going to study at the School of Art there, to be a portrait-painter.

One afternoon, in the early part of December, Frederica was drawing by the light of the gas chandelier, and Esther was sitting as usual apart. It was a snowy day, and the girls, confined to the house, had made more noise than was customary even with them. More than once Frederica had mildly expostulated, but it was of no use, and Esther had given up in despair the attempt to study. The bell rang for tea, and Esther put up her books with a sigh of relief, but Frederica,

who had been interested in her work, involuntarily uttered an exclamation of disappointment. "What's the matter, Freddie?" asked one of the girls, pausing to look at what she had been doing. "Why, it is very like—I wish you would draw me one of these days. You have never drawn me yet."

Frederica looked at her drawing, and then in an abstracted way at Esther. "Yes, I think it is like, but this light is so bad. You can't draw by gas. It is the mouth that is not right. I thought I had got it this time."

"It is a funny mouth," said the other, critically regarding the new girl; and Esther, seeing that she herself was under discussion, and judging by their looks that they were not ridiculing her, stepped forward, and over Frederica's shoulder saw a pretty likeness of herself.

That Frederica should have considered her face worth studying, implied an interest which moved her to gratitude. "You have been drawing me!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," said Frederica, still looking at her work; "but your mouth is so difficult, and you moved. I wish," she added, "that you would sit to me some time, when you are not doing anything particular. Should you mind? I have tried so hard to get your face—and it is good

practice to draw it, for you have a great deal of expression."

"Do you think so?" said Esther, wondering still more. "Would you really care to draw me?" she added, looking wistfully at the young artist. "I should be so glad to sit to you, if it helped you."

"Oh, yes!" said Frederica. "Thank you; it would be a great help. You see," she went on, "some day or other I want to become a portrait painter. I want to make it my profession. It is a great thing to have a profession if one is poor. I shall begin really to study as soon as I have left school; and in the mean time I draw every face that I see, for the sake of practice; and it is so delightful to get one which is different to every one else's. The other girls would sit readily enough, but *they* don't improve one. Perhaps there is some one you know, who would like to have your portrait, and if they did not mind it not being very first-rate, my drawing might be a pleasure to them."

"There is no one," said Esther, sadly at first. —Yes, there was George, who would care, but he seemed lost to her now. The tears sprang to her eyes; and Frederica, watching her, wondered vaguely at her look of forlornness. Then Esther's face suddenly brightened, as though by magic.

"Oh, yes! there is Joe Bride!" she cried. "He would not know anything about the drawing, whether it was very good or not; and he would so dearly like to have a picture of me."

"Joe Bride!" repeated Frederica curiously. "Is that any one in Australia?"

"He is the sailor," answered Esther, "who used to be so kind to me on the island, but I forgot. You don't know anything about the island. Joe is head pilot now."

"I did not know that you ever lived on an island," said Frederica. "It sounds so funny and interesting. I should like very much to hear about it some time if you would tell me; but it is tea-time. Let us go in together, and afterwards we will come back here, and you can look over my sketches, and tell me about the island."

There was the faintest shade of patronizing interest in Frederica's manner. It was the sentiment furthest from her thoughts, but her intelligence was just of that kind which finds a little difficulty in merging its sympathies in the life of another. Esther's heart was bounding out in a gush of enthusiasm towards her new friend. As Frederica linked her arm within her own, and the two girls went thus in to tea, Esther felt that her hungry longing for kindness was at last partially

satisfied. Frederica had done nothing to excite gratitude, she had simply offered to make use of her school-fellow, but poor Esther was ready to pour out the treasures of her affection at Frederica's feet.

That meal was different to any other she had eaten at Bolingbroke House. The morsels did not seem to choke her as they had always done before, and Frederica's attention seemed a shield which protected her from ridicule. When Frederica again took her arm as they returned to the school-room, she could not help saying, "How kind you are to me!"

"Kind!" repeated Frederica, surprised, and yet pleased; "why, I thought that you did not care that any one should take notice of you. You seemed so silent and proud. I thought that perhaps you looked down upon us; and we, though we are poor, are well-born. It is not for us to force ourselves upon people's notice. When I spoke of you to Aunt Theodosia, she said—"

"What!" asked Esther, eagerly—for Frederica had paused, in doubt whether to proceed—"Oh! how could you fancy that I thought such things. It was you who I feared might despise me."

"How could I tell?" said Frederica. "People often look down upon others in England for being poor; and I am going to work for my living.

Aunt Theodosia said that the Isherwoods were all proud, and that they were 'carriage people.' "

"I don't know anything about their being 'carriage people,'" said Esther, to whom the phrase was a new one; "but I think that Lady Isherwood is very cross. I did not even know that they were my relations, till I came to England three months ago."

"And were you brought up altogether in Australia?" asked Frederica, becoming more interested. "And on an island? You promised to tell me about it."

Delighted to find a listener who cared to hear, Esther launched into a description of her island life, with just such reservations as Sir Emilius' warning, and her own dawning sense of fitness, made her feel were desirable. Nor, it is needless to say, did she make any confidence about George Brand.

"It is very beautiful," said Frederica, referring from an artistic point of view to Esther's word-sketch of the Cape and the lighthouse. "It sounds like a scene out of the 'Pirate.' Norna of the Fitful Head, you know. I can't help thinking that it would make a pretty picture, if I could only see it. I should like to call it the 'Fitful Head,' and to draw you as Brenda standing against the rocks, with the sea creeping in to-

wards you ; but I am very stupid, and I cannot imagine what I have not seen."

"But I could describe it," cried Esther. "I can see it at this moment, just as though I were there. It would be a winter afternoon, and the sun setting. The lighthouse, all red against the sky, which would be purple, and the sea grey, tipped with foam, and gulls swirling round in the air above the rocks—"

"You can see it," said Frederica, "because you have lived there ; but I cannot."

"It is not only places that I know," said Esther. "There are others that I have never seen or read of. And people too. They stand out in my mind like pictures. It is as though there were another world, which we cannot see with our outward eyes."

"That is having imagination," said Frederica, in a sad tone. "I have none—or very little. They all tell me so ; and I can feel that the want of it will prevent me from ever doing anything great, though I love Art so dearly."

To Esther this was a real palpable grief—one with which her whole nature could sympathize. She ventured softly to touch her new friend's hand.

"But after all," continued Frederica, "it is portrait painting that I want to succeed in ; and

every one tells me that I have a good eye for a likeness. Would you like to see some of my drawings? But the best are at home; these are only rough things done in my spare time." She turned over her portfolio, and showed Esther a collection of sketches—heads in pencil and chalk—mostly of persons unknown, but several of girls at the school. There were a great many studies of a large-featured, impressive-looking old lady, who had a great air of self-assertion, and glared from the paper in a stony way that was somewhat alarming. "That is Aunt Theodosia," exclaimed Frederica. "I live with her. I am an orphan, and she takes care of me."

"And this!—why, this is Bernard—Mr. Comyn, I mean—" exclaimed Esther, pouncing upon a spirited but very unfinished sketch of a man's head, that had been dashed off, evidently in haste, upon the leaf of a note-book. "Do you know him?"

"Who is Mr. Comyn?" asked Frederica, blushing deeply. "I am almost ashamed to tell you how I did that. I don't know the original. It was one afternoon at Westminster Abbey. He was standing exactly opposite me, and there was something in his face that interested me. He was listening very intently to the sermon, and yet all the time he seemed to be inwardly

sneering at the preacher. Then the organ began to play, and his expression changed completely. I could see that he was very fond of music. I love it too. They say that musical people are always sympathetic—that made me want to draw him. I have never seen him since.”

“He is Lady Isherwood’s cousin,” said Esther. “He dined at their house the first evening I spent in England.”

“It is a face with a good deal of power,” said Frederica, musingly, and then she silently put the drawing away. There was a tenderness in her way of handling the picture, as though it were a thing precious to her. Her interest in Esther deepened considerably, but she hardly breathed even to herself, that it was because of the new girl’s link with this unknown hero.

CHAPTER II.

AN AFTERNOON AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE.

ESTHER was much more happy now at school. She no longer felt the terrible oppression of solitude and misconception which during the first two months had been so terrible to her. It is difficult to convey what Frederica's kindness meant to her, and what a fount of gratitude it opened in her parched heart. It was not only that Frederica was gracious to her, and took her under her wing as it were, in a sweet protecting way, bringing her into the circle of her own interests, and helping her with her lessons, solving for her difficulties that had seemed insoluble ; but it was the satisfaction of that starving need of sympathy and affection, of which the poor girl had been so keenly conscious. Never since the death of her mother had she had a woman friend whom she could love and admire. To look up to some one was a requirement of Esther's nature. Her shy sensitiveness

held her back from ordinary companionship with girls of her own age, and that would, too, have been insufficient to her wants. A friend, to her meant far more than the word in its ordinary acceptation.

Frederica was touched by Esther's devotion. She also had her clearly-defined aspirations, and she too felt the need of expansion. She confided to her new friend the ambition of her life. This was to study as a portrait painter, in time attain to an independent income, and a studio of her own, and in the years to come, to provide a home for her two sisters, who were little girls in the charge of a relative of their mother's. Frederica's nature had been cramped and narrowed by the grinding influence of poverty, and contact with vulgarity of the kind which showed itself in a perpetual self-assertion, and vaunting of former greatness. But the girl was too innately refined to have become vulgar by association. Her training made itself evident in a little reticent pride, a slight soreness on the score of poverty, a patient industry, and confidence in her own efforts, to procure her future independence, and to Esther she was everything that was noble and self-devoted.

Esther listened reverentially to everything that Frederica told her, admired her for her talent and

ambition, and was always ready to *pose* herself as a model at her friend's desire. When, after a succession of attempts, one was finished to Frederica's liking, Esther carefully packed it, and sent it by the Australian mail to Joe Bride, with a letter assuring him of her well-being, and begging for news of the Overstones, of the Pilot Station, and of Mr. Lydyiard and his colony of settlers. Esther told Frederica about Mr. Lydyiard, and in a shy, embarrassed manner mentioned George, touching upon his pleasant manners, and his disinterested kindness, which was magnified in poor Esther's mind to the height of heroism, but not confiding the love story which shed a glow over the island memories.

There was nothing in Frederica, sweet and sympathetic as she was, to draw forth confidence about a love affair. She held herself aloof from the schoolroom talk about flirtations and beaux, making no secret of her contempt for such subjects. Her soft superiority was never disturbed by such-like tattle. Perhaps she had her own shrine at which she worshipped secretly, but if so, it was too sacred to be spoken about. She openly proclaimed her conviction that Art and the profession were sufficient to sweeten life, and that the vulgar idea of having a lover, was lowering, and quite beneath her gentle seriousness.

Esther had already begun to feel a little modest shame about her love, and Frederica's openly-avowed sentiments made her hug her secret closer to her own bosom. She confined herself to talking about her past life apart from George Brand, dwelling with a kind of tender home-sickness upon the beauty, the wildness and vastness of the island, as compared with this prim English civilization.

Frederica listened to Esther's descriptions, with but a vague comprehension of experiences so far removed from her own. But they opened out another vista in her mind. She pondered, was interested, and felt, though she hardly framed the thought, that there was that in Esther's nature which supplied a want in her own. This was to be found in Esther's susceptibility to every abstract influence—her enthusiasm and yearning after a high impersonal good, expressed more in manner than in words. Frederica, with a great deal of surface grace and sensibility, touched a certain depth, but went no further. She loved music, and particularly music of a higher order. Mozart's precise combinations of harmony delighted her, and she played Schumann and Beethoven with all the orthodox expression, and a good deal of natural taste. But she did not grasp more than the sentiment of the com-

position, while Esther, though she would have failed utterly to interpret it, felt herself lifted up to the inspiration which had given it birth.

It was that touch of genius in Esther's organization, which filled her with vague yearnings that seemed to mock at her cramped personality, and that her meagre education utterly failed to satisfy. There is always, it seems to me, something far more pathetic in the nature which turns wistfully towards the light, tied down by the painful consciousness of inability to rise to it, than in the trained intelligence that strives after a definite goal, and has at least the joy of labour and incentive, though it may also have to endure the bitterness of disappointment. In Esther's circumstances had made it impossible that she should cherish any distinct visions of a spiritual or human good. She wished for nothing (to her) possible of accomplishment, but the very indefiniteness of her longing deepened the sense of unrest. It was as though her young soul was imprisoned against its will, and was constantly leaping up in an ill-directed and ineffectual effort to reach a purer atmosphere.

This feeling is more common with women than with men; and more frequent in young, and comparatively uneducated women, than in those

whose intellects have matured and been trained to a precise limit.

It seemed to Esther that the spirit within her was clamouring unintelligibly for a power of expression. It thrilled at the sound of poetry or music, or at the sight of beauty of colouring or form, but that was not enough. "Could I but write," thought poor Esther to herself, as one evening she paced the deserted school-room, with a pencil in her hand, and the craving upon her, with which many another woman who reads this page will sympathize. "Could I but compose a poem, or paint a picture, or even play with fit execution and deeper expression, one of Frederica's sonatas. I think I should want no higher joy."

But a woman does not do any of these things without preliminary education and patient labour. Art is of all mistresses the most difficult and the most exacting in her demand for self-renunciation on the part of her wooers. When Esther had breathed forth her passionate ardour in crude utterances, how bald, how miserably tame and inadequate they seemed! But she had relieved her spirit, and she felt a thrill of a new kind of happiness. Though she tore her verses into minute fragments, a moment after they had been conceived, they left behind a sweet satisfied glow which seemed to pervade her whole being.

Frederica entered softly as she was standing at the window, looking out into the wintry night and the thickly falling snow. "Why, Esther! what are you doing here all alone?"

"Doing!" repeated Esther, turning round with the light in her face; "nothing. I never *do* anything, but I am thinking, and wishing—Oh, Freddie, if I had only been educated like you: if I had only been taught to play, or to paint, I should be quite satisfied with life."

"Are you not satisfied now?" said Frederica. "And it is not only teaching that is wanted. Of course people must learn, but they must have a bent too. I can't quite make you out, Esther; you always seem as though you wanted something, and you are clever, but not in any particular direction. I daresay that you are much cleverer in reality than I am; I have always loved music and drawing ever since I can remember. By-and-by I shall go to the School of Art, and then if work will make me anything— Oh, if I could only pay back Aunt Theodosia something of what she has spent upon me, and save my sisters from being governesses. There need be no more pinching and scraping and trying to keep up appearances. It is that which makes life hard."

"I did not mean that," said Esther, her enthu-

siasm softly quenched. "Money is very good, but it is not the joy of creating, the knowing that one's own ignorance could no longer cramp one in."

"Yes, it is Art—Art, that true musicians and painters live for," said Frederica sadly, but still placidly—"but I know what is in me and how high I can go ; and I can never reach that. It is the money that I think of—and the comfort—but that is not being a true Artist."

Esther had been three months at Bolingbroke House when the Christmas holidays came.

All the other boarders, including Frederica Talmadge, went to their own homes, but Esther was in a homeless condition. Sir Emilius and Lady Isherwood had shut up their houses in the country and in London, and were abroad for two years, and somewhat to Miss Binney's annoyance had requested her to take charge of their niece during the vacation. Miss Binney did not much care to be troubled with the amusement of a solitary boarder, and was not disposed to give up a visit she had planned to some relatives in the south of England ; so Esther was left with an elderly governess as friendless as the girl herself, who occupied her time principally in replenishing a dilapidated wardrobe, and allowed her charge to do much as she pleased.

Esther was far happier in the deserted house than if it had been full of giggling school-girls. Lower Norwood would have been paradise had Frederica remained with her, but the next best thing to Frederica's society was the pleasure of working for her; and she had planned a pretty surprise for her friend in the shape of a case for her pencils and chinks, the outside of which was to be embroidered with coloured silks.

When she was tired of needlework she had the garden to walk in, and on clear frosty days, when the ground was white with a crisp coating of snow, and the bare trees looked like gigantic branches of coral, it was more attractive to Esther than when, later on, it had all the luxuriance of summer vegetation. Snow was a new experience to her, and the sight of the flakes falling made her think of Hans Andersen's story of the "Snow Queen," which hardly realizing, she had read to Rod Overstone on the island.

At this time she spent a part of Lydyiard's present in the purchase of a complete set of Scott's novels and poems, literature to which, Miss Cameron assured her, even the austere Miss Binney could make no objection. Esther would sit up late at night reading, and in the long afternoon darkness before the lamps were lighted, would people the deserted house with the

heroines she liked best, and the heroes who most resembled George and Bernard Comyn.

One Saturday afternoon, having finished Frederica's satchel, she was sitting over the fire in the empty schoolroom devouring 'The Heart of Midlothian,' when Marianne, the housemaid, came in and said that "a gentleman was in the drawing-room waiting to see Miss Isherwood."

Esther started to her feet, a sudden blush suffusing her face. She knew that her uncle was not in England, and what gentleman but George could wish to see her! He had come at last—her hero—her lover. . . . Marianne's next words strengthened the conviction.

"It's a young gentleman, Miss, dark and tall, and very good-looking."

With her book still in her hand, Esther went to the drawing-room, her heart beating violently, while her fingers trembled so that she could scarcely turn the handle of the door. She did so at last, and entering timidly saw—not George Brand—but Bernard Comyn, who was examining the books laid out in prim order upon the table.

She had come in with a bright expectancy upon her face, her cheeks aglow, and her eyes dewy and downcast. Her extreme prettiness came upon Bernard with a shock of surprise. He had carried away from Berkeley Square, upon

the evening of her arrival, an impression of a pale, desolate-looking creature, interesting, but badly dressed, and utterly ignorant and forlorn. Now he thought her the loveliest girl he had ever seen.

"Why!" he said, shaking hands with her. "You have grown so much fatter and brighter that I should hardly have known you again. You looked, when you came in, as though you expected something wonderful to happen to you, and I believe that you are half disappointed at only seeing me. Isn't it true now?"

"It is true that I thought you were some one else," replied Esther, too confused to be anything but truthful. "I had hoped—I had fancied—but I'm very glad to see you, sir—Mr. Comyn, I mean."

"That's right; I am delighted to find that you remember the first lesson I ever taught you; but I am not going to call you Miss Isherwood, because if we are to be on those terms, it might not be quite proper for me to take you out, as I came to do. I am sorry, Esther, that you were disappointed. I did not think you had so many friends that you would not be pleased to see me."

"Oh how you mistake!" cried Esther, with her quick flush. "I think it is more than good

of you to come. I have often thought of you, sir," she added shyly, "and of how kind you were that first evening."

"Then who was it who disappointed you, Esther?"

"It was some one I knew in Australia," said Esther, her lips quivering slightly; "and I was sorry, Mr. Comyn, for I am afraid that he cannot know where I am, and I don't know how to tell him."

"Well, perhaps I can help you," said Bernard. "He has changed his abode perhaps. He might be in the 'Directory.' What is his name?"

Esther looked down but made no reply, and Bernard repeated the question in a more peremptory tone. "I dare say there is a 'Directory' here. What is his name, Esther?"

It seemed to Esther as though the very last words she could have pronounced at that moment were "George Brand." She opened her lips, stammered, and looked piteously at Bernard with her large beseeching eyes, as she said, "I—I'd rather not tell you, sir."

Bernard eyed her with a sharp displeased surprise. Why should she not tell? What did she mean by her hesitation? Could this young creature have a love affair of which her friends were ignorant? It seemed impossible that any-

thing vulgar or clandestine could be associated with that face and voice. He was annoyed, but told himself that it was no business of his. "Oh, very well," he said; "I hope you don't think that I want to pry into your secrets. Let us say no more about it. Perhaps I had better go away. I intended walking to Sydenham."

An impulse, of the strength of which she was hardly conscious, made Esther put out her hand to detain him. "Dont go," she said almost imploringly.

"I won't if you don't wish it," said Bernard, smiling at the childlike gesture. "I must tell you what brought me here in the first instance. Parkins came to my diggings yesterday with a commission from the Isherwoods. They are abroad, you know; and he happened to mention that you were spending your holidays alone at school. I thought that sounded rather dreary for a young girl like you. School-girls like to be taken to see sights in the holidays—at least I used to think myself precious ill-used if I wasn't; and it struck me that there was a pantomime going on at the Crystal Palace, and that we might go to it together. I'm rather fond, myself, of being made to laugh at nothing at all. Should you like to go, Esther?"

Esther's face beamed in a way that repaid him

for any trouble involved in an act of good-nature to a friendless little girl. Bernard had felt himself in need of a walk that morning, and had set off at a brisk pace towards Norwood. He had suddenly remembered what Parkins had told him the day before about Esther, and a vision of the forlorn creature in her draggled black gown, and with the sympathetic eyes which had interested him in a vague, pleasurable way came before him. "By Jove!" he thought, "I should like to give the poor little thing a treat. I dare-say she has never seen a pantomime in her life"—so instead of walking on alone to Sydenham, as he had vaguely intended, he turned in at the gates of Bolingbroke House, and inquired for Miss Isherwood.

"I should like it very much," said Esther.

"All right," said Bernard. "I'm so glad I thought of it. Go and put on your bonnet, and we'll start at once; it is not far to walk, and I'm uncommonly hungry after my tramp. We'll have some lunch at the Palace, and see the pantomime afterwards."

Esther ran upstairs and put on her hat and jacket, almost forgetting the pain of her disappointment in the thought of the pleasure before her. She left a message for Miss Cameron, who had gone upon a shopping expedition to the

City, to the effect that Lady Isherwood's cousin had come to take her for the afternoon to the Crystal Palace.

"And now," said Bernard, as the two stepped briskly side by side along the frosty pavement, "tell me if I walk too fast; now I want to know how you get on at school."

"I did not like it much at first," replied Esther, "but I am getting on better now, Mr. Comyn."

"Call me Bernard," interjected her companion. "It is shorter—and like other people." But Esther was as yet too shy for such familiarity.

"It does not seem quite so hard now," she continued; "and I have got into the verbs in Ollendorff."

"I don't know anything about Ollendorff," said Bernard; "but if I had been set to teach you French, I should first have drummed a few nouns and conjugations into your head, and then I should have given you an intensely interesting book, and the dictionary, and I should have allowed you to puzzle it out by yourself. That is how I learn languages."

"I am sure that I should get on much better in that way," answered Esther.

"And you like school on the whole?" said Bernard. "I was sure that you would, if you

really wanted to improve yourself. I dined in Berkeley Square the night after you left. Hermione told me where you were. I could not help thinking of you afterwards, and picturing your forlorn look ; but I did not know that you were going to be left here for the holidays. . . . They shut up Barwold and went off in a hurry. Charles lost a lot of money on the Cambridge-shire, and there was a regular blow up ; but Hermione should have arranged for you to go somewhere during the vacations. I could have done nothing, because I live in bachelor's quarters ; and besides, I should not have known what to do with you."

Esther laughed at the notion. There was something about Bernard, which made it impossible to be shy with him. "Have you made any friends yet?" he asked.

"I have one friend," replied Esther ; "at least I think that I may call her a friend. She is so clever and very pretty ; her name is Frederica Talmadge ; she draws and plays beautifully."

"That is good," said Bernard, nodding approvingly. "There is nothing like music."

"But it is her drawing that she thinks most about." Esther went on—"She means to be a portrait painter, and to earn her own living and have her sisters to live with her. There are three

of them, but they are all scattered; they are orphans, and Frederica is the eldest."

"And your friend is studying painting?"

"She is going to the School of Art as soon as she leaves Miss Binney, and means to work there for two years. Now, she is always drawing people's likenesses, and you can't think how good some of them are."

"You should keep to Miss Talmadge," said Bernard, with his air of decision. "I like your description of her. It is so pleasant to hear of a woman with an interest in life beyond millinery and frivolity."

"Frederica only cares for her profession," said Esther. "Do you not like women?"

"I like them," said Bernard, "as one likes things that are only good to look at it. I like a pretty woman as I like a fine picture—hardly so much; for in the one there may be inspiration. Of course, there are exceptions; but I am speaking mostly of young girls. I don't go out a great deal; but almost all I meet are very silly."

Esther was silent, hardly knowing how to answer so sweeping a condemnation.

"I don't mean that I think you 'silly,'" said Bernard, fancying that she did not answer because she was piqued; "I hope you don't imagine that I implied anything rude. And I

don't consider you a grown-up young lady. What I meant to convey was, that women, as a rule, are irrational, and seldom precise in their statements. I would not admit their evidence in a law court, for instance, or a scientific inquiry. It is always women who believe in ghosts, and who take to spiritualism, and the confessional. Here we are at the Palace. Why, what a colour you have!—a walk like this every day would do you a great deal of good. Keep close to me; you had better take my arm. There seems to be a crowd."

He piloted her through the entrance and into the body of the building. Esther had been to the Palace before. Once or twice Miss Binney had given her boarders a treat, and had taken them solemnly to a concert of classical music, or walked them round the Aquarium and Picture Gallery. But to walk two and two with a party of giggling school-girls—Frederica had never been with them, for these expeditions were always made on Saturday, the day on which she returned home—was a very different thing to being escorted by Bernard.

He infused quite a new spirit into everything, and stopped as they went along to tell her something that he thought would interest her. He was fond of imparting information, and was a

little egotistical, but his egotism was so frank that it became rather pleasant than otherwise.

He took Esther into the dining-room overlooking the wintry garden, in which the ponds were to-day frozen, and the lawns carpeted with white, and they ate their luncheon together—not a very *recherché* repast—but it did not occur to Bernard, as it perhaps might have done to another young man, to add any dainties to the bill of fare on Esther's account. He was hungry and enjoyed his meal, and his frank good-humour placed Esther at her ease, and gave her a sensation of *camaraderie* and light-heartedness which she had not often experienced.

After luncheon they walked about the building till it was time for the pantomime to begin. Esther enjoyed the spectacular effect, and the ballet, and laughed at the mummers, and held her breath with wonder and delight as the transformation-scene descended. It was a new enchantment to her. She was still child enough to feel that the lovely unfolding flowers, the sylph-like forms, the wands and jewels, the soft radiance of pink and pearl, were all a part of this wonderful fairyland. I think that she would have enjoyed a good drama more, but this was sufficiently beautiful and satisfying to make her heave a deep sigh of pleasure. She

would rather not have seen the ugly clown and tawdry columbine, as they skipped on to the stage in front of the commonplace drop-scene, and uttered an involuntary sound of disappointment. "You won't care for this," said Bernard; "let us go and listen to the organ for a few minutes before we go home."

"I have been so happy," said Esther, gratefully. "Thank you for bringing me."

Bernard smiled at her. "If you had been brought up in England, you would have become thoroughly *blasée* by a long course of Christmas pantomimes. I ought to thank you for letting me see unsophisticated enjoyment."

They left the theatre, and sat down in the great hall, where the lamps were all lighted and the organ sending forth full-toned harmonies. Bernard listened in evident enjoyment of the music. Groups of holiday-makers strolled past them. There was nothing poetic in the Cockney element which abounded in the place, and there was a confused buzz of footsteps and voices mingling with the music, but it seemed to Esther as though she and Bernard were alone together in the vast building, and had contrived to skim the cream off the pleasures provided there.

Presently Bernard looked at his watch. "Come," he said; "it is getting late, and it

would not be right of me to keep you out too long. Take my arm again, and we'll walk home if you are not tired."

It was snowing slightly when they reached the door, just enough to sprinkle the pavement ; and while Bernard was putting up his umbrella, a woman with a basket of violets and Christmas roses touched his arm. Esther eyed the flowers wistfully, and Bernard seeing her glance bought a nosegay and gave it her. " You must hold up your gown," he said, tucking her arm tight under his. They walked home together beneath the umbrella, with the keen air and tiny snow-flakes driving against their faces.

The gas was lighted in the drawing-room at Bolingbroke House, and as Esther and Bernard stood on the doorstep the notes of an impromptu by Schubert, which some one was playing within, were faintly audible outside.

" Who is playing ? " asked Bernard, humming the refrain.

" It must be Frederica Talmadge," cried Esther, excited at the prospect of meeting her friend. " It can be no one else. Oh, you must come and see her. Do come in."

Bernard waited for no further invitation, but followed Esther into the drawing-room.

Frederica was sitting at the piano, playing to

wile away the time, without any notes. She had taken off her hat and jacket, and the outline of her graceful figure showed plainly in her dark merino gown. The light from the gas chandelier fell upon her oval, serene, face and fair hair, which was brushed smoothly and fastened in a knot behind her head. She looked up at Esther with her full-lidded, and rather prominent, violet eyes, and nodded smilingly.

"So you have come back at last," she said, without pausing in her playing, but she ceased abruptly as she caught sight of Bernard in the doorway.

"Oh, Frederica!" exclaimed Esther, "I am so glad to see you. This is Mr. Comyn. We have been at the Crystal Palace, and have seen a pantomime. Oh, Frederica, go on. Mr. Comyn is so fond of music."

Frederica hesitated modestly for a moment; then continued where she had left off.

CHAPTER III.

AUNT THEODOSIA.

WHEN Frederica had finished her piece of music she left the piano, and acknowledging with a little bow Bernard's thanks turned to Esther. "Now I must tell you what brought me this afternoon, and indeed I ought not to stay much longer, for Aunt Theodosia will be uneasy. She is concerned that you should be spending your holidays here alone, and has written you a note, asking you to return with me. There is a train from Lower Norwood at half-past six o'clock, which will take us direct to Gloucester Road Station, if you can get ready in time."

Esther felt a thrill of alarm at the thought of encountering Aunt Theodosia, of whom she had pre-conceived a terrifying impression, but the delight of being with Frederica in her own home, was sufficient to outweigh every other considera-

tion. She opened Miss Talmadge's note, which was written after the style of the polite letter-writer, upon thin, cheap paper, and in a flowing hand, with a great many flourishes difficult to decipher.

"13, Magenta Terrace,

"South Kensington.

"MY DEAR MISS ISHERWOOD,

"Pray excuse the informality of thus addressing you, without the preliminary compliment of a call, from one, who during the early part of a varied career, of which twenty years were spent in visiting among the highest circles in England and on the Continent, became in a casual manner acquainted with several members of the distinguished family of your uncle, Sir Emilius Isherwood. The dear friend of my youth, Lady Susan Starkie, being remotely connected with a branch of the Isherwood family, and herself a distant cousin of my own, I may claim the ties of a mutual ancestry as an excuse for inviting you to return, *sans cérémonie*, with my niece Frederica, and to pass a few days beneath my roof.

"Believe me,

"My dear Miss Isherwood,

"Yours, with sincere regard,

"THEODOSIA GLENCAIRNE TALMADGE."

Esther looked up somewhat bewildered from the perusal of Miss Talmadge's involved sentences.

"Of course you'll come," said Frederica; "Aunt Theodosia wishes it particularly, and I cannot go home so late by myself."

That there should ever have been any possibility of such a proceeding seemed to Bernard so unconventional, that he looked with surprise and some pity at the slight, pretty girl who ought certainly not to be allowed out so late in the evening, even in the company of another of her own age and sex; but he did not venture to make any suggestion of impropriety. "Would you play something more?" he said, when Esther had gone upstairs to prepare for the visit.

Frederica moved to the piano with a little hesitation. "You play yourself, don't you?" she said, pausing, and fingering the instrument.

"Yes," said Bernard, looking at her in surprise. "How did you know that?"

"Oh! I don't know—I guessed it, I think," replied Frederica, in her even, agreeable tone, in which there was very little variation of inflexion, but she blushed slightly as she spoke. "I thought—I mean I fancied, that you cared very much about music."

"Music is worth caring for," said Bernard, raising his chin in dogmatic assertion of a fact

that had not been questioned. "So are many other things. I am not one who takes life at a dead level; but the pleasures which are best worth seeking, have the minority of followers. Music, literature, and art are not not such fashionable pursuits as boating, dancing, or lawn-tennis. You have been well taught, I see, and must have practised much. From whom have you had lessons?"

"Herr Stolzheim teaches at the school," replied Frederica. "I believe that he is considered a good musician, and I have practised a good deal, but I have had so few opportunities of hearing high-class music."

"To hear good music is not of such great importance as people fancy," said Bernard. "It certainly imparts correctness of style and execution, but that you have got already. It is not there that you fail—"

"Where then?" asked Frederica, her placidity a little stirred by Bernard's suggestion of fault-finding. "Of course I know that I fail in all points, but which is the particular one? Tell me, please; I like to learn."

"You want emotion," said Bernard, "scope, culture. You are literal and formal. Do you understand what I mean? You have the executive capacity. I hope you are not offended."

"Oh, no! I am not offended," answered Frederica, with the docility of a conscientious learner. "It would be petty to mind criticism; but music is not the thing nearest me. I will try to improve. I want to do everything as well as I can. There is no use in trying to be anything, unless one makes up one's mind to work and to take hints."

"Do you want hints about anything else?" asked Bernard, interested.

"I want to know a great deal, particularly about painting, but perhaps that is not your line."

"You make me feel ashamed," said Bernard. "I have no line. It takes a long time before a fellow of no decided proclivities can make up his mind as to his vocation. I only know that I am always intensely bored by what seems to interest other people. Society appears to me extremely puerile. It's a nuisance, and I hate modern æstheticism."

"Won't *you* play something?" said Frederica.

Bernard went to the piano without any hesitation. His long flexile fingers fingered the keys with that masterliness which is most observable in masculine execution. He began in a negative manner, a complicated composition of the German school, which seemed to interpret, with a hundred

subtle variations of harmony, the same central theme. His playing gave the impression of depth, or, as he expressed it, scope. Sometimes it warmed to passion, but mostly suggested the idea of a large fund of enthusiasm held in check. While he was playing, Esther returned with her bag, and with the bunch of flowers Bernard had given her pinned into her dress. "It is too dark for you to be out alone," he said; "I will see you home."

"Oh, pray don't trouble to come," said Fred-erica; "our house is only a minute's walk from the Gloucester Road Station."

"It is too dark," repeated Bernard; "I have nothing to do. I may as well return to my chambers by South Kensington as by any other way." He took up Esther's bag, and walked with the two girls to the station, seeing them into the train, and taking his seat beside them.

Miss Talmadge lived in a terrace, in one of the small streets leading out of Gloucester Road. She impressed upon her friends that the situation was genteel, though her neighbours were not quite of her own social status; and there were advantages in being near the Underground Railway and the Museum. She occupied a tiny house, which had miniature bow-windows and area-railings, and a low door with a brass knocker. It

was a great trouble to her, that the owner of the next house had a plate upon his gate, and that her neighbour opposite kept a lodging-house, and exhibited a bill in the window; but she herself was a lady of independent means, which, if slender, seemed to be elastic.

"This is our home," said Frederica, indicating number 13, which was almost in darkness.

Bernard lifted the knocker in a sounding rat-tat-tat, and after waiting a few minutes they heard a scuffling, and heavy tread in the passage, an undoing of bolts and bars, and finally the door was opened an inch upon the chain, and a nose protruded cautiously from behind it.

"It's only me, Aunt Theodosia," said Frederica.

"Bless you, my child! It did not sound like your knock;—and you've brought Miss Isherwood. I'm obliged to be so particular with valuables in the house—heirlooms, my dear. Come in, Miss Isherwood. I am charmed to welcome beneath my roof a distant connection, if I may say so, by blood. Frederica has told you, I am sure, that my dear friend, Lady Susan Starkie, was a third cousin of Sir Giles Isherwood—your grandfather, my love; and Lady Susan was fourth cousin to my mother, who was the great-grand-daughter of the Earl of Glencairne—a title now extinct. But you are standing in the cold."

All this had been spoken with such extreme volubility, that the time occupied in its utterance was shorter than might be imagined. Esther was hustled into the narrow passage, while Miss Talmadge still mysteriously blocked up the doorway.

"The porter," she said. "No, don't enter; thank you. The servants will carry Miss Isherwood's luggage upstairs." Miss Talmadge spoke with the dignity of a lady who had a retinue at her call, but of which the only sign visible at present, was a dirty little maid who looked twelve years old, and had hurriedly lighted the gas from a flaring dip she carried in her hand. "Where is it from, my dear?" the old lady added, in an audible tone aside to Frederica, "the Metropolitan Station?—then it is two pence, not a penny more; and leave it on the door-sill, if you please. I can't have my stair-carpets dirtied; and that's the way half the burglaries in London are committed. These men find their way into genteel houses under pretence of portorage, and take plans of the premises. I know it for a fact."

"Aunt Theodosia!—oh! hush, please; you can't see in the dark," exclaimed Frederica. "It's not a—a porter; it's Mr. Comyn, Lady Isherwood's cousin, who has been so kind as to see us home."

“ Oh, my love, how very remiss !—why did you not introduce Mr. Comyn before ? A cousin of Lady Isherwood’s—pray excuse my shortsightedness ; but one has to be so careful with valuables, you know. Then you must be the son of my dear friend, Lady Susan Starkie’s third cousin, a daughter—no—let me consider—the only daughter of Sir Edward Oldershanks, with whom during my visiting life I was upon intimate terms. I know all about your family, Mr. Comyn. Now you must do me the pleasure of partaking of a cup of tea, or a glass of sherry ; not a glass of sherry—I insist, really—or I shall feel that you are offended with me for my ridiculous blindness.”

Bernard was constrained to enter the narrow hall where Esther was standing. Frederica was blushing uncomfortably, and with her arm in that of her friend, was about to lead the way down-stairs, to a little parlour on the basement used by the family on ordinary occasions, when Miss Talmadge’s voice arrested her. “ Frederica, you are forgetting, my love—the drawing-room is here.”

Miss Talmadge opened a door upon her left, and ushered her visitors into an apartment pervaded by a mingled smell of pepper and turpentine, which sent Bernard off into a fit of sneezing. The old lady hastily turned up the gas, and

motioned them into two arm-chairs covered in red cotton velvet, with a gorgeously worked footstool before each, and a table, in the centre of which was a vase of paper flowers, between them. The room had a cold, desolate look. The furniture was all very shiny, and the walls were profusely ornamented with cheaply-gilt brackets, and oil paintings, in tawdry frames. Miss Talmadge herself was imposing enough. She was both tall and robust, with strongly-marked features, and a very straight back. She wore an old-fashioned, violet, checked silk gown, made very full round the waist, and trimmed with several rows of that coarse lace which is, I believe, called Yak. Her dress had wide sleeves, below which were full muslin ones, terminating round the wrist in a band of narrow embroidery. She dressed her abundant, dark brown front in curls, fastened with a comb low down upon her cheeks, and wore a cap trimmed with imitation lace, and some tawdry artificial flowers. She also talked very fast, and had a way of mincing her words, which gave her speech an affectation of fineness.

“And now, Mr. Comyn, I insist upon your partaking of a glass of sherry. It is some that my late father bottled, and he knew a good glass of wine when he tasted it. A finished gentle-

man, Mr. Comyn, was my father," added Aunt Theodosia, with an impressive nod of her head. " 'Beau Talmadge,' as His Royal Highness the late Duke of Cambridge—with whom my father was in youth upon terms of intimacy—used to call him. Frederica, will you ring the bell for the sherry and biscuits?—or perhaps I had better go myself, for I have a new maid, Miss Isherwood, and she has hardly yet acquired my ways."

Frederica blushed again with the consciousness of the solitary drudge below-stairs, but Miss Talmadge left the room with a dignified, protesting air, as though she were not accustomed to such menial offices, and presently returned bearing a tray, upon which was a plated biscuit-tin, ornamented with a coat of arms, and a decanter of muddy sherry. She poured out a glass, and Bernard contrived to swallow it without making a wry face, and delighted Miss Talmadge by admiring an oil painting of the late Colonel Talmadge in full uniform, that hung upon the wall opposite. She told him, with tears in her horny old eyes, that the family had fallen into a state of decadence, and that she and her nieces were now the sole representatives of a distinguished line of ancestors. "And when I think, Mr. Comyn, that my grandfather drove his coach-and-four—but it is the consciousness of birth

which sustains me," added Aunt Theodosia impressively, "and we must reflect that the workings of Providence are inscrutable. That is always a consolation."

Bernard remarked that Providence, like the law of gravitation, was a comforting solution to various problems.

"It's a Higher Power," replied Miss Talmadge, "and through all my varied experiences I have seen no reason to doubt its omnipotence. There are things, Mr. Comyn, which are beyond our control, and the extravagance of our grandfathers is one of them. There was my father, who would drink his bottle of champagne—the most expensive that money could buy—every night of his life. But there is something sustaining in the feeling that one has inherited a refined taste. You can't deceive *me* in champagne."

Bernard rose to take his leave.

"You must come to see me again, Mr. Comyn," said Miss Talmadge, warmly shaking his hand. "We are blood relations, you know. People may despise a pedigree, but an old woman who is the lineal descendant of the Earls of Glencairne, knows how to hold her position, though her means may be incompatible with her birth; so you must come to luncheon or to dinner some day when you are not engaged with your cousin,

Lady Isherwood, who must naturally absorb much of your attention when she is in town. She was a great beauty, I believe. I think I met her once at a reception in the house of my dear friend and connection, Lady Susan Starkie, but that was in the days when I led a visiting life and went into dinner company. Oh yes! you must dine with me. I have an excellent cook, for I am quite aware how much you London gentlemen who have clubs, and that sort of thing, think of the *cuisine*."

"My love!" she whispered confidentially to Esther, when she had returned from letting Bernard out, "you must not betray me if you discover, while you are in my house, that these two hands are my excellent cook. I vow to you that I have been frequently assured that Francatelli himself couldn't surpass me. But then I have lived a great deal abroad, where it is considered no degradation to a lady to toss up an omelet. In England things are very different, and though I flatter myself that I have a mind above such considerations, one does not proclaim these little domestic secrets beyond the family circle."

Poor old lady! She went downstairs to the kitchen afterwards to "make the tea," refusing Frederica's proffered assistance, and bidding her conduct her guest upstairs.

But the tea was a long time in preparation, and the two girls, sitting together in the little parlour which looked out upon the area, heard Miss Talmadge's voice directed in loud reproaches against the offending drudge in the next room. Her company manners were forgotten in her wrath, and presently she entered heated and irate, and setting down a salt-cellar upon the table, arranged the knives and forks, talking faster than ever, and forgetful for the moment of Esther's presence. "It's not the least use, Frederica—I did wish to make a proper appearance—and the best silver out, which is a responsibility in itself. Your friend must take us as we are. It's no use trying to be different."

"Dear aunt," pleaded Frederica, "if you would not try, or if you would but let me help."

"I know what is due to my birth, Frederica, but this is more than flesh and blood can stand, and my back that tired with arranging the drawing-room—It's all that girl; that obstinate, ignorant idiot, and her conceit. It's past all belief—to presume to tell me how a beefsteak should be cooked. I, who have assisted at banquets almost royal; who have lived in dinner company over twenty years of my life." Miss Talmadge's voice rose to its highest pitch when she touched upon this brilliant period in her

existence. "And those were not repasts like the paltry things *à la Russe*, that have become the fashion in the last few years. 'Then there would be a turkey at one end, and a splendid joint at the other, and boiled capons, and tongues, and a game-pie in the middle, to say nothing of seven or eight side-dishes, and jellies, and creams, and fal-de-rals, and what nots. And there were the massive silver covers, not an inch of the damask showing. Ah! a dinner-party in those days was a grand affair! You'll see nothing like it at your uncle, Sir Emilius', Miss Isherwood, I'll be bound, or anywhere else, for it's not the fashion now, and fashion ranks before jurisprudence, as you'll discover when you go into high society."

While Miss Talmadge was still haranguing her audience, the little maid carried in the beefsteak, and the meal was suffered to proceed, but not in silence. Nothing could stem the torrent of Miss Talmadge's reminiscences now that they had the stimulus of a fresh listener. "Mr. Comyn seems a very prepossessing young man, my dear," she remarked to Esther; "unmarried, I understand. Is he an eldest son, or heir to any property?"

"I do not think that he is very rich," replied Esther.

"Ah! you never can tell what these young

men have. The Comyns were considered a wealthy family. I must look them up in Burke. Very friendly, and quite at his ease; a little wanting, perhaps, in *les petits soins*, but that is a deficiency which one must lay partly to the style of education in the present day. You never now see the finished gentlemen with whom I was familiar in my youth. It showed a respect for *les convenances* to escort you home. Poverty compels us to walk alone, but in our class of life it is not considered becoming. A lady need never be insulted by impertinent attentions; but it is unfortunate when, as was the case with me, her appearance is such as to excite observation. I could never pass in a crowd—and you, Frederica, are in that respect quite a Glencairne. I am reminded, my love, of an adventure that befell my very dear friend, Lady Susan Starkie, in the streets of Paris. She was a very clever woman—plain, but with a dolly waist, and as narrow a back as mine at seventeen, which is saying a great deal, for I was always considered to possess a perfect figure. Seeing Lady Susan behind, you would have taken her for a young girl; but she was a grandmother, my dear—married young, but still a grandmother. She had her veil down, and paused to look in at the window of a curiosity shop—for she had a passion for

bric-à-brac—when a man, who had followed her, accosted her. ‘*Madame aime les antiquités ?*’ said he. Lady Susan was not at all taken aback. She lifted her veil, and showed him her wrinkled little face. ‘*Et Monsieur aussi,*’ she replied, and walked on. Lady Susan was an *esprit fort*—a woman of mind—but then all my friends were more or less intellectual. I laid myself out for improving society ; and during my visiting life I always devoted four hours every day to the acquirement of subjects for conversation—history, science, theology, the fine arts. I was what is called a brilliant talker, and could converse fluently on all these topics.”

The clock struck nine. They were still sitting over the tea-table, for the flow of Miss Talmadge’s self-laudatory recollections had prolonged the meal. “Aunt Theodosia,” said Frederica, “Esther has been to the Crystal Palace this afternoon, and I dare say she is tired, and would like to go to bed.”

“I hope, my love, that Miss Isherwood will always retire when she feels inclined,” said Aunt Theodosia ; and Esther rose to say good-night. “Stay, my dear ; I will precede you upstairs with the light.” She led the way to a little room opening out of Frederica’s, which was called by Aunt Theodosia the guest-chamber.

“My dear,” said the old lady, kissing Esther, “you must take us as we are. My house may not be quite so grand a mansion as that of your uncle, Sir Emilius Isherwood; but it is clean and airy, and, at all events, you are certain of a hearty welcome. When Frederica told me that you were all alone at that school, it went to my heart. ‘Let her come here,’ I said, ‘and be one of us.’ So you must stay as long as you can be happy and contented; but there is one thing I must entreat of you, my love, and it is not much to ask. I must beg that you will not sleep with the counterpane upon you. You observe that it is very fine, and will not bear much washing. It came to me from my mother. It would get sadly soiled at night, besides being unhealthy; and if it is taken off, and folded up—so—it will last clean twice as long. As I said before, I should not have ventured to ask you here from the house of your uncle; though no one knows better than I do the customs of the aristocracy and their mode of life, having been the pet and plaything of the highest circles for twenty years of my existence, but Frederica tells me that you have been brought up in Australia. My dear friend, Lady Susan Starkie, had a son who went out there, and lost all his money, and his mind, from a *coup de soleil*, and ended by marrying a

convict's daughter, so I know what people are out there. . . . I must not keep you up now ; and Frederica is next door, you know. . . You'll find the room very warm, and not at all damp, for the flue of the kitchen chimney goes up beside your bed, and those curtains keep out the draught from the windows nicely. They're beauties, aren't they ? I bought them at the Earl of Mountpleasant's sale ; and those in the drawing-room came from the mansion of the Marquis of Olney. You must notice the cornices to-morrow. Good-night, my love. I hope you'll sleep well. You must let me call you Esther, for you are only a poor little orphan like Frederica, and my heart warms to you."

Miss Talmadge went away, but an hour later poked in her head again, this time denuded of its front. "My dear, are you asleep ? There is one thing I did not mention, and as it's important I'll tell you now in case I should forget it to-morrow morning. I must beg you to lie upon each side of the bed upon alternate nights, for it is a spring mattress, and weak in the middle ; and if you should hear any bells ringing during the night, don't be alarmed, for I have had them put upon all the doors and windows, and I pull the strings always before I go to bed to make sure they haven't been cut. Good night, my love."

Soon after, as Esther was lying awake in the dark, there came a faint tap at the door, and Frederica, with a candle in one hand, and a brush in the other, entered, and seating herself at the foot of the bed, began to plait her fair and abundant hair for the night. "Are you comfortable, Esther?"

"Yes, dear Frederica," replied Esther, "but not at all sleepy."

Frederica went on plaiting in a ruminative manner, and when she had finished sat for a minute or two silent, with her hands clasped round her knees. At last she said: "Esther, does Aunt Theodosia strike you as being very peculiar?"

"I think she is exceedingly kind," replied Esther, evasively. "And you know I am no judge of peculiarity in other people, for I know so few, and you always tell me that I am odd myself."

"Yes, dear, but not in that way. I am afraid that Aunt Theodosia is odd; it strikes me sometimes more than others; but you must never laugh at her. I could not forgive you if you did. You cannot see on the surface her real goodness, and devotion. I love her dearly, and no wonder; she has always denied herself, and has made no merit of it. While my father was

alive—her only brother, a poor, curate with a hundred and forty pounds a year, and a delicate wife, and four children—she existed on the merest pittance in order that she might help him. Then when he died, and she took me to live with her, I believe that she almost starved herself, in order that I might wear decent clothes, and go to a good school. Even now, she does almost everything in the house herself, and will not let me help her, because she says it will spoil my hands, and injure my delicacy of touch. It is not that we have anything to be ashamed of,” added Frederica, drawing herself up with a little touch of pride, “for we are well-born, and independent, and that is the great thing; but Aunt Theodosia is very poor, and latterly has had to struggle against losses, and to do the best with a little. It is not surprising that she should look back with pleasure to the days when she was better off, and that she should like to talk of Lady Susan Starkie and of her visiting life. Still it must sound strange to people who do not know. Do you think that Mr. Comyn thought it curious her talking so, and pressing him to dine?”

Esther's quick sympathy perceived her friend's drift. She saw that Frederica was a little ashamed of her aunt's airs of gentility, and was

annoyed that they should have been made so apparent to a stranger.

"I would rather he did not come to see us," continued Frederica, "unless he will take us just as we are. It would kill me to think that he laughed at Aunt Theodosia."

"I am sure that he would not do that," replied Esther, warmly.

"I am sorry," pursued Frederica, thoughtfully, "that he should have had to drink that sherry. It is very nasty, I know."

Frederica sat twisting a long strand of hair about her fingers, her face at first slightly troubled, then reflective, and gradually a soft smile crept round the corners of her mouth—a conscious smile—accompanied by a scarcely perceptible blush. "I wonder what he would say if he knew that I had drawn him in Westminster Abbey ; why, it must be two years ago," she said half aloud.

Girl-like, she attached far more importance to the fact than Bernard would have done had he known of it. All that he thought of Frederica as he walked home to his rooms, was that she seemed an intelligent, sensible girl, who was very nice-looking and had aspirations considerably above the type she represented. It was Esther who had laid the strongest hold upon his imagination

and who, though she was such a child, and had said so little, attracted him most powerfully.

There are persons who, without strong, objective capacity for influencing others, have an intense individuality, which makes it impossible to incorporate them into any recognized type. They pose themselves, as it were, in our imagination, and however slight may be the intercourse in which they figure, they make a distinct impression. Esther, in spite of her unfledged youth, had this peculiarity. Bernard also possessed it in a remarkable degree.

His unlikeness to other people showed itself most in an indifference to ordinary social aims. But he was not wanting in vitality, either emotional or intellectual. Life ran in no flabby current for him. It seemed all too short for all that had to be done in it, and the difficulty was to prevent it from becoming chaotic. He kept a little out of the common stream, making figurative excursions, as it were, without any very definite object, and never attaining to the standpoint of impersonality. He was too conscious of himself to possess the faculty of disinterested consideration of human problems, and when this is the case, it is difficult to map out a satisfactory plan of existence.

CHAPTER IV.

A MEETING AT BURLINGTON HOUSE.

IN spite of Aunt Theodosia's peculiarities, and a certain irregularity in her mode of household management, Esther enjoyed her visit to Magenta Terrace.

It was so warming and comforting to feel herself one of a household, no longer forlorn and out in the cold ; and to be talked to with affectionate garrulity, upon matters of domestic and personal interest, was quite a new experience to Esther, and awakened sentiments of gratitude in a heart that had been starving for sympathy and affection.

She became really fond of Aunt Theodosia in spite of that lady's odd ways, which were sometimes a little surprising, and she adapted herself so readily to the household difficulties, and made herself so useful on occasions, that Miss Tal madge quite threw off her company manners, and came to regard her guest as one of the family.

Every spare moment of light, when they were not sightseeing or out of doors, Frederica spent at her easel. She already made a little money by painting Christmas and birthday cards, and would give her aunt her gains with a delightful consciousness of partially discharging a debt; and then, too, Bernard's criticisms had inspired her music afresh, so that there was never any time for idling. Sometimes, when Frederica was busy, Esther would steal into the bright little kitchen, where Miss Talmadge, without her front, and clad in a mysterious brown flannel garment called a cooking-dress, superintended the operations of the small maid. Esther would unobtrusively begin paring a dish of apples of which Miss Talmadge was about to make a pie, or whip up the eggs for a cake, or wipe the precious Glencairne forks, which were far too valuable to be trusted in the hands of the drudge, while Aunt Theodosia rolled her pastry, or stirred her custard, and it is needless to say—talked.

“I never let Frederica help me,” she said one day, nodding towards the basement parlour where her niece was practising. “I make a principle of it, my love. It wouldn't have done. She would always have been wanting to potter about after me; and what would have become of her hands? She has got pretty hands—quite her

grandfather's hands, and he was thought the most distinguished man in his corps—crowned heads have remarked him; and then Frederica has her drawing, you know; her heart is set on that, and I don't say anything against it. There's nothing degrading in Art. It's not like being a governess; it is dreadful to think of one of our family being brought to that. My dear, I have done without meat in the week while Frederica has been at school, on purpose to save something for the girls, to keep them from *that*. It's for the sake of the ancestry; but you must never breathe it to Frederica. I daresay she'll marry by - and - bye. A Glencairne never was single for the want of asking; and then what I've saved will go to her sisters; and if Turks and Egyptians and Texan railways go up—for I have speculated a little for the sake of the pedigree—my love, she may be a rich woman yet. The things I've done, my dear, to save money would astonish you. I tell *you* because one *must* talk to somebody; but you must never betray me to Frederica. She thinks that her petticoats and collars and things are given out to be washed, but it's these fingers that do them while she is away at school. She would never forgive me if she knew it. The reason why I don't keep a grown-up servant is, because besides

the wages they are so artful and dishonest, and as for condescending to eat the scraps, they'd turn up their noses at a piece of fat or a dinner without meat——”

Aunt Theodosia quarrelled with her tiny abigail upon the smallest provocation; a spot of rust upon a saucepan, or a trace of dirt upon the doorstep, would drive her crazy. Precept had to be enforced by example so frequently, that it was quite a common occurrence with Miss Talmadge, to spend a part of the day upon her knees pipeclaying and scouring, while she asserted loudly, for the benefit of those whom it might concern, that it was impossible for a scion of the Glencairnes to be degraded by menial occupation.

One morning Frederica ventured to remonstrate with her for cleaning her own doorsteps in the sight of the neighbours. “Surely, dearest aunt, it is not necessary.”

“Frederica,” rejoined Miss Talmadge with great dignity, “cleanliness is always necessary. I have a mind above humiliation, and it is of no importance to me what my inferiors think of my conduct. I will not deny that if Mr. Comyn were to pass by and to see me upon my knees, I should experience some pardonable mortification, but I choose my hours when that is not likely to

happen. At one time I did it at night when the neighbours were asleep; but no matter whether it was midnight or early morning the policeman was always at the gate, and accosted me with, 'Can't I help you, Ma'am?' as regularly as possible, till I began to fear that his attentions might bear an ill construction, and desisted from my nocturnal scourings; and, as I said to him, 'It is a small mind, sir, that cannot rise above circumstances.' "

But concerning these domestic trials Esther was sworn to secrecy, and when Miss Talmadge invited the friends of her youth to tea, which happened once or twice during Esther's visit, this lofty pose was abandoned, the drudge was kept out of sight in the kitchen, and a tidy waiting-maid hired for the occasion. Miss Talmadge, in her checked silk, seated in the drawing-room, beneath the portrait of the late Colonel Talmadge, would mention casually the names of Sir Emilius and Lady Isherwood, as near relatives of her young friend, and denizens of that higher sphere in which she had formerly gyrated; while anecdotes of Lady Susan Starkie and of the visiting life would be freely trotted forth from her memory.

Miss Talmadge, in her good-natured desire that Esther should see all the sights of London,

organized a series of expeditions to the Tower, Westminster Abbey, Madame Tussaud's, and such places of cheap access which she thought might be interesting to the Australian mind. They usually started about twelve o'clock, after an early luncheon and hurried toilette on Miss Talmadge's part, which was generally concluded in the train. The old lady's dress was peculiar, like her manners. At this time—it being winter—she wore out of doors a long cloak of imitation sealskin trimmed with crimson plush, and a silk bonnet of the shape of a soup plate, crowned by a nodding plume of cock's feathers.

“Dear aunt,” said Frederica more than once, “you know that I am quick with my needle. I wish you would let me make you a black bonnet.”

“My love,” replied Miss Talmadge, “it is of no consequence what I wear. I have not spent twenty years in a visiting life among the highest circles, without bearing its stamp on my appearance. My dear friend, Lady Susan Starkie, used to say to me: ‘It is no matter, Theodosia, in what fashion you attire yourself. You always grace your toilette, whether it be that of a queen or of a peasant maid.’”

But Aunt Theodosia exercised no restrictions upon her niece's taste; she allowed her to purchase and make up, the quietest of cashmeres and

linseys, and took a pride in Frederica's apparel, while she continued to twist up for her own wear the faded and tawdry relics of her visiting life, with a sublime self-confidence that had in it a touch of heroism.

She always travelled with a large cotton umbrella, a pair of overshoes, and a reticule of purple cotton velvet, which contained a variety of small articles, and hung upon her arm wherever she went—whether to the receptions of her friends, who, by some extraordinary process of decadence, had all descended from the high sphere of Belgravia to the lesser one of Camberwell or Clapham ; or to second-hand shops where she picked up cheap articles of furniture that had formerly graced the mansions of the nobility.

Esther enjoyed the sightseeing, though it was attended by several inconveniences. Miss Talmadge always journeyed third-class by Underground Railway, or took penny omnibuses down Piccadilly or Regent Street, whence they walked to their destination. She had a dangerous habit of standing stock-still in the centre of a crossing, while she descanted in a loud voice upon the past glories of the Talmadges who had rolled in their coaches through those very thoroughfares ; and she invariably haggled with the omnibus conductors over odd pence, and so attracted towards

her party a degree of unpleasant attention ; but these drawbacks were of small importance to Esther, who felt herself little more than a waif in London.

The happiest days Esther spent were those in which she accompanied Frederica alone to the National Gallery, or the South Kensington Museum, where they carried their luncheons in their pockets, and ate while they talked. Esther would lose herself before a favourite picture, and Frederica would criticise, more occupied with technicalities, than enthusiastic. This, Esther reflected, must be because she meant to be an artist, and wished to lose no opportunity of improving herself.

A winter exhibition of paintings by old masters was at this time going on at Burlington House, and the two girls went one day together to see it.

Frederica had her note-book in her hand, and was going the round of the galleries in a methodical way, taking down her impressions of each picture which attracted her—portraits she especially studied—while Esther wandered aimlessly through the rooms, now pausing in one, and now in another, till at last, tired with walking, she sat down upon one of the settees opposite a wonderful picture, by Gainsborough I think, in which a man skating seems about to step out of the

canvas to address the spectator. There was a door upon the right of this picture, leading into one of the first rooms, and though the place was not crowded, a thin stream of people seemed to be perpetually passing to and fro, framed for a moment, and then disappearing. It was like the tapestry in the bedchamber of a certain fairy prince, where figures moved by in a continuous never-ending string.

Esther sat thinking. She felt, then, that solitude of individual life, that often oppresses one when in juxtaposition with a number of human beings, whose hopes, interests, affections, all centre in a different world to one's own. Naturally her thoughts reverted to George Brand. It was exactly a year since they had parted, and during that year her life had completely changed its course. Her habits of thought were altering too. Her knowledge of the world, circumscribed though it still was, was enlarging. Her affections and sympathies were warming into healthier life. Though she was unconscious of any actual difference in herself, a great one had really taken place, and that, just at the age when the feminine nature is most plastic, and the impressions received from without, are most vivid.

Esther thought that George Brand's image was quite set apart in her memory, and that no

lapse of time or change in her external relations with the world could blur or fade it. And she was right so far that it was distinct enough; but it was the impression that had been made upon the craving ignorant heart of a young girl—not the true imprint of the man himself. Esther could not help feeling perplexed and anxious. Why had he never sought her since her arrival in England? Could he have failed to receive her letter? Did he repent his disinterestedness in having chosen her? . . .

As she was picturing him again in her mind, his very face and figure was framed for a second in the doorway. He passed—George himself. His eyes looked vaguely into the room where she sat—not seeking hers, not fixed with any definite aim—and then disappeared.

Esther started to her feet. The strings of her heart seemed to distend and to snap. “George!” she cried faintly, with the feeling that he *must* have seen her sitting there—that it was impossible that he should not turn and seek her. She waited a moment, but there was no sign of him, and then came the mastering impulse to follow him. A crowd stood before the skating picture, obstructing the doorway, but she dashed through it; and then forgetting the way she had entered, took a wrong turning, and found herself in the refresh-

ment-room, confronted by smart waitresses behind a counter laden with sherry and sandwiches. *He* was not there. She retraced her steps, and this time gained the vestibule, only to see the figure she sought descending the stair, and passing into the courtyard. Esther followed. There was a string of carriages before the entrance, and George had again disappeared. She saw him a moment later, in the act of getting into a hansom; but as she was darting forward among the horses to stop him, the cab drove off.

A policeman pulled the girl back to the pavement, and she stood leaning against the wall with a dazed feeling of utter helplessness and of keen disappointment numbing all her energies. In the short space of recognition her illusion had suffered a shock. She could not account for it, but she felt that it was so. 'It seemed impossible that George could have materially changed during the one year of separation, yet Esther felt that that purposeless, facile-looking man, in his faultlessly-cut coat and well-waxed moustache, was not the demi-god who had figured in her daily and nightly dreams, and given shape to all her yearnings after heroism and high goodness. . . . He was very handsome; handsomer even than she had pictured him in her memory. He had just the same ease of bearing, the same full

dark eyes ; but there was something in his face that jarred with the ideal image she had formed, —perhaps the faint, scarcely-definable trace of coarseness, that is apparent as lightning to the perception of a pure woman, though she does not know how to express the almost inappreciable shrinking it excites—or perhaps the absence of reliable motive in life that was apparent upon the handsome face.

It may appear improbable that all this should have been conveyed in so short a time to Esther's instinct or intelligence. It will be more readily understood, if we reflect that knowledge of individual character has been most frequently borne in upon our minds, not after years of intimate companionship or familiar study, but in startling flashes of inspiration, after a long parting, or a change in outward circumstances, or in inner thinking, which has placed us for the moment upon an impersonal stand-point.

“Esther,” said a voice close to her elbow, “what are you doing here ? Has anything happened to you ?”

She looked round and saw Bernard. He was standing a few paces distant, his earnest eyes fixed upon her with a look of troubled surprise. He observed that she was trembling, and that her face was full of a suppressed excitement for

which it was impossible to account. She put out her hand to him, almost without knowing what she was doing, but with a strong confidence in the mere fact of his presence, as a means of helping and bringing her back to herself. . . . It seemed to Esther as though the mainspring which had ruled her life had suddenly snapped. It was not the circumstance of having seen George, and of having failed to attract his attention, that so powerfully affected her. It was a disappointment—one might almost say a repulsion—far more subtle, and less easily put into words. . . . But there was Bernard looking as though he could restore her old faith.

“Bernard!” she cried, using for the first time his Christian name. Her voice sounded like an appeal for help, and that, with her movement towards him, touched, while it puzzled him.

“What is it, Esther?” he asked again. “Are you frightened? Has any one spoken rudely to you?”

She shook her head, but did not speak.

“Come with me, and sit down,” said Bernard. He took her hand as though she had been a little girl. There was something in his touch very comforting to Esther. She pressed his hand with more energy than she was aware. The grasp of her little fingers thrilled through Bernard. She

was appealing to him, and all his nature answered to the appeal. He led her into the building again, and through the corridor to the refreshment-room. Here he placed her upon a chair in a corner, and brought her a glass of wine. "Come, drink this," he said in a kindly, authoritative manner, watching her while she swallowed it, "and don't be frightened. Remember, I am here to take care of you. Now," he added, when she had finished, "tell me what was the matter."

When she had first felt the touch of Bernard's hand Esther's confidence had seemed to leap towards him. She had had an impulse to tell him the whole story about George. Not that she expected him to help her; no one could do that. There seemed to have been awakened in her a kind of fierce, maidenly instinct which made her shrink from having George brought near her through any act or will of her own. During the short time that she had been in England she had gained glimmerings of knowledge, of a kind that comes to women partly by intuition, but mostly by contact with other women. She had heard the question of love discussed in that tentative manner common to girls, and had gleaned that it involved mysterious possibilities of which maidenhood forbade the discussion. She had learned that it is a reproach to a woman to thrust herself

upon the attention of a man, and she blushed at the thought that she had run after George, who had been her lover. But there was not this feeling of embarrassment in connection with Bernard, the only other young man in the world with whom she was in any degree intimate. He had inspired her with a sense of support. She leaned unconsciously upon his judgment, and felt that he would understand her ignorance and helplessness. He was a man, and knew the world, and he must be acquainted with this strange delicate ground, over which she had no guide but her warring, inconsistent impulses, and maidenly tremors, and recoilings from a totally undefined source of peril. The confession had been upon her lips; she had longed to make it when her fingers had closed round his, but in that busy, prosaic spot, with his clear eyes looking her through and through, as he asked the commonplace question, "What is the matter?" she felt that she could not speak to him of her lover, and of those vague delicious island experiences. Something seemed to rise in her throat and choke the words, and she sat silent and downcast.

"Well?" said Bernard.

"It is nothing," replied Esther in confusion. "No one was rude to me, or—frightened me. I

thought I saw—I mean I did see—some one that I knew in Australia. I ran after him, and he drove off. That was when you found me.”

Bernard looked at her with a sort of grave disappointment. He too had had his recoil of interest, but with it there had been a pang. “Esther, I am certain that you saw the person whom you expected to come to you at Miss Binney’s. Tell me his name.”

Esther was silent, with all the doubtful influences at work within her.

“Was it that man?” asked Bernard with confirmed suspicion but quickened interest.

“Yes,” replied Esther faintly; “but I can’t tell you anything about him.”

“It is right that you should tell me, or some one,” urged Bernard. “You seem very friendless. You are only a child. If it were any one whom you had met on board ship—” His mind leaped to the most probable explanation of the mystery. “You are very pretty, and don’t know the world. It is not right that you should have secrets.”

Esther blushed, and a thrill went through her that was not gratified vanity. He thought her pretty then—too. She shook her head. “It was no one on board ship.”

“You won’t tell me anything more?”

She shook her head again.

Bernard drew back a little haughtily. "I have no wish to force your confidence. I hope for your own sake that you may never meet this man, though I don't know, and don't want to guess, what there is between you. You are too young, and I trust too honest, to have a clandestine love affair. That would be a shame to you, and wrong towards Sir Emilius, who is your natural protector."

His displeased tones deepened in Esther's mind the sense of something to be ashamed of. Was it possible that George himself had come to think lightly of her? It was impossible now to speak to Bernard. There was nothing left but to be silent and loyal till she knew George's mind. Fidelity seemed an anchor to cling to. It was a wife's crown to be loyal to her husband, and had not George told her that they were as good as married?

"You have drunk your wine," said Bernard, still distantly. "We had better go. I suppose that you are with some one; that you are not here alone. I will take you to your friends, if you will tell me where they are."

"I am with Frederica; I left her looking at the pictures."

"Well, we had better find her."

She rose from her chair, and their eyes met.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” said Esther, with a child-like break in her voice.

“Pshaw!” said Bernard, with a little laugh, and an upward movement of his chin, which was peculiar to him when he was self-assertive or annoyed. “I am not angry; I would have helped you if I could; that was my only reason for seeming to pry into your concerns.” Then disarmed by the quivering of her lips and beseeching look in her eyes, he added: “Well, I won’t be angry. You may keep your secret whatever it may be; I’ll trust you. We’ll drop the subject.”

“That is a nice girl, that Miss Talmadge,” he said, as they were walking through the rooms in search of Frederica; “the sort of woman I like—modest, intelligent, and accomplished, and plucky too; but I couldn’t stand much of the old lady. Do you like being there? It seems a queer sort of *ménage*.”

“Oh, you must not laugh at Miss Talmadge,” exclaimed Esther earnestly. “Frederica was distressed at the thought.”

“Was she? Did she think that I would laugh at her aunt? I never make fun of people. The complexity of human nature, when one dives below the surface of so-called society, is, I think, extremely interesting. I have no doubt that the old lady is a character worth studying.”

"She is very good; she has sacrificed everything for her family, and for Frederica. She denies herself luxuries that she may save money for her nieces."

"I'll come and see you there, before you go back to school; but if you could contrive that I am not asked to drink the late Colonel Talmadge's sherry, I should feel grateful. There is your friend."

Frederica's tall, graceful figure was conspicuous in the doorway. She had her note-book and pencil in her hand, and was looking anxiously round for Esther. She smiled and blushed as she saw the two approaching. Bernard placed Esther on a settee, and he saved her from questions as to where she had been, by proposing to show Frederica some portraits of Lady Hamilton that were in another room.

They were absent some little time. Bernard found Frederica's society pleasant, and was struck, upon turning over her note-book, by some rough sketches that she had executed that morning. They talked in a desultory way about Art and books. There was nothing particularly fresh or original in Frederica's remarks; there seldom is in the utterances of a school-girl, however intelligent she may be; but what a man most admires in a feminine companion is an appre-

ciative attention. That, Frederica undoubtedly exhibited.

Esther was sitting in the same place when they returned, with that far-off look in her eyes that puzzled and interested Bernard. He watched her for a moment, but said nothing, and Frederica, intimating that they ought to be going home, held out her hand. He bade both the girls good-bye, saying, as they were turning away, "I'll come some afternoon, Miss Talmadge, and bring you that book upon Art that we were talking about; I think you would like it."

The two girls walked down St. James's Street, and through the Park to the Metropolitan Station at Queen Anne's Gate. It was a clear, frosty afternoon, and the sun was setting over the City. They paused on the bridge to watch the skaters who had crowded upon the water, but neither of them spoke. Frederica seemed absent and thoughtful, though her eyes were bright, and her soft complexion glowing beneath her little, black hat and veil; and Esther was struggling against a feeling of keen disappointment and depression that almost found vent in tears. The world seemed more inharmonious than ever to the poor girl. All her warm, young feelings seemed cruelly crushed; and distrust, uncertainty, and a

two-edged pain that touched both Bernard and George, had taken their place.

When they reached Magenta Terrace she went silently upstairs to her own room, avoiding the jarring of Miss Talmadge's voice below, and escaping from Frederica who lingered to answer her aunt's questions about the excursion. She sat for a long time at her window, looking out upon the dingy, shabby-genteel street, watching the night close in, till the lamps were lighted and the curtains drawn in the opposite houses, crying softly to herself, and repeating in an undertone, "Mother, mother, you meant me to love him."

It had been dark for some time when Frederica tapped softly at the door, and entering, said in her placid voice, "Esther, aren't you very cold here? There's a nice fire in the parlour, and tea is nearly ready. Aunt Theodosia sent me to tell you."

Esther answered in a confused way, and Frederica perceived by the stifled sound of her voice that she had been crying. Going to her, she took her hand and kissed her softly. "What is the matter, dear?" she asked, in her sweet, unemotional tones, that yet seemed to invite confidence. "You have been so quiet all the afternoon. Why did you run away at the

Academy? I saw you start up and fly out, as though you had seen a ghost; and when you came back with Mr. Comyn I was certain that something had happened."

Esther leaned her head against Frederica's shoulder and sobbed. "I—I wish that I could tell you—everything," she said brokenly. I am unhappy. I can't help feeling miserable. I don't understand. Things seem to get more puzzling the older one grows."

"What is puzzling?" asked Frederica. "Tell me; you know that you can trust me."

"Frederica," said Esther, almost in a whisper, "you have never had any one—to care for—to care for you, above every one else in the world?"

"Do you mean a lover?" said Frederica. Her voice trembled with a kind of awe, which could not have shaken it, unless there had been a dim form somewhere in the background of her imagination to consecrate the name. "The girls at school talk of such things, but they don't know any better, or how their talk lowers them; but I—how should I? What do you mean? Is it *so* with you, Esther?"

"Not like the girls at school," said Esther. "It was on the island—a year ago. He went away from me," she whispered.

"It is Mr. Brand," said Frederica, with placid

conviction. "I guessed it; I knew it from your manner when you spoke of him—and you saw him to-day?"

"I saw him in the Picture Gallery. He did not see me, and he looked so careless, as though he had never had a heartache since we parted. I ran after him, and he drove off, and then Bernard found me. He wanted me to tell him, and I could not—and I am sorry—"

"Never mind, dear Esther," said Frederica, soothingly, not taking an exaggerated view of the position; "perhaps it was best to say nothing. He must see you again, some time or other, and then he will come back to you. If he meets you again, he must care for you, even more than he did upon the island."

Frederica softly stroked Esther's hand. "I am glad that I have told you," said Esther, tenderly; "we won't speak of it again, but I could not bear that you should not know what was in my heart. You have been so good to me, Frederica; I am so grateful to you."

"I have not been good to you," said Frederica. "What have I ever done for you?"

"You *have* been good to me, better than you think. I think that I should have died if some one had not seemed to care for me. You don't know what it feels like," continued Esther,

shuddering, "to feel so lonely, as though you had been forsaken, and there was no one in the world to care whether you were alive or dead. It was so with me till I had you. Now everything is different. You have made the difference. Frederica, you'll believe how dearly I love you."

"I think you are fond of me, you enthusiastic little creature," said Frederica, with complacent sweetness; "but then I am fond of you too."

"It is not only that I am fond of you," Esther spoke with deepening earnestness, "but that I feel as if I never could repay you. It would be a joy to me if I knew now, that I could do something in the future to make your life happy—that I could give you any great thing for which you cared."

Unconsciously to herself, Esther spoke so solemnly that a moment after she had uttered the words she felt as though she had taken upon herself a vow. The echo of it seemed to linger in the small, darkened chamber. It was as though she had bound herself to something which she could not now foresee. She was almost frightened at the impression her own voice had made upon her. Just then Miss Talmadge called loudly up the stairs. "Frederica, my love, the tea is getting cold, and such a beautiful, buttered muffin. I know you

like muffins. Has Esther got a headache? I am not surprised. There is nothing more fatiguing than looking at pictures, as I know from experience, having traversed all the noblest galleries of Europe. Lady Susan Starkie always took a pinch of soda in a wine-glass full of water when she had a headache. She said that it was a corrective to acidity. If Esther would like to try the remedy, I'll bring it up to her."

"Esther is coming in a moment, Aunt Theodosia," cried Frederica, running down-stairs. As soon as Esther had composed her face a little, she descended and took her place at the tea-table. Happily Miss Talmadge was short-sighted, and talked too much to observe her silence.

True to his promise, Bernard brought the book which he had offered Frederica. He came to Magenta Terrace one afternoon, about a week after the day at the Picture Gallery. Esther had a strong suspicion that he had watched Miss Talmadge out of the house, for his knock sounded ten minutes after the old lady had set forth upon a shopping expedition to the High Street. Frederica was painting a fan, and Esther was reading a dilapidated edition of Ainsworth's 'Tower of London,' which she had picked up in Miss Talmadge's lumber-room.

Bernard looked at her in a penetrative manner.

Several times she met his eye, but he did not talk much to her, addressing himself principally to Frederica, commenting upon her work, and asking questions about her proposed course of study at the School of Art.

"I shall leave school at midsummer," said Frederica, "then I shall begin to study hard at Anatomy; though I am afraid that even if I don't fail altogether it will be a long time before I paint a picture worth anything."

"Everything takes a long time," said Bernard, "and I suppose that one must always be prepared for failure—but I don't think that you will fail. When I next see you, you may be a rising young portrait painter, exhibiting your pictures to an admiring public. We shall both be working," he added abruptly. "I am going to Germany next week."

"To Germany!" echoed Esther and Frederica. "Shall you be long away?"

"Eighteen months or two years. I am contemplating a dive into German metaphysics, and I want to read Goethe in the original. An accurate knowledge of the language is so necessary in almost all branches of literary study."

"Shall you like living abroad?" asked Frederica.

"I find life in England a great bore. There

is so much sham about society, and people won't let one do as one likes. I'm complaining of my family—a pack of silly women who have nothing to think of. One can defend oneself against one's enemies, but heaven save one from one's friends. I am eccentric because I take my exercise soon after the sun is up, and sit over my books when other men are lounging about the Park or Piccadilly, or smoking in their clubs. I don't race, hunt, read the *Field*, play cards, or frequent theatres, therefore I am supposed to be without resources. I am called an infidel for not going to church, and because I have failed in an examination for which I made no particular effort, I am considered a ne'er-do-weel."

Frederica laughed. "What are you going to do then?"

"I have not decided," answered Bernard with sublime self-confidence, "whether I shall compose an opera or write a book."

"I wish our piano weren't so bad," said Frederica, glancing doubtfully at the cottage Broadwood with its faded front, which Miss Talmadge had picked up cheap at a broker's, and which had, tradition said, once stood in the boudoir of a duchess.

Bernard sat down and ran his fingers over the keys, producing some responsive sounds from the

old instrument which had a few sweet tones left. "It is not so bad; I daresay that it was fairly good in its day." He began playing with great delicacy and masterliness some soft flickering airs that seemed to tremble in the dusky room like the little jets of flame that leaped up in the grate, and cast timid reflections upon Miss Talmadge's antique salver, and the face of the eight-day clock swinging its pendulum over the sideboard. Then he wandered into more abstruse harmonies, that revolved round a clearly distinguishable sentiment, and were no longer tremulous and evanescent. It grew dark, and Frederica put away her colour-box, and Esther laid aside her book. It was not Bernard who was playing, but a genius of sound, who had transformed the low, homely parlour, with its shabby furniture, into a temple of tender inspiration and softly-thrilling fancies.

They were each wrapped in their pleasant illusions when Aunt Theodosia's heavy foot came clattering down the area-steps, and pressing her nose against the window, she peered undiscerningly into the dim room, and tapped loudly at the pane. "Oh, my dears, open the door quick; I am nearly dead, and my hands so full that I could scarcely get out of the omnibus. As I passed Mr. Hawke's shop, in Gloucester

Road, I saw the loveliest slice of cod for sixpence. We'll have it broiled for tea, if that idiot of a child has had the wits to keep the kitchen fire alight. . . . And a Sally Lunn. I know that Esther is partial to Sally Lunn. . . . And, my loves, I've heard that Turks are up again. Laws! who is that? You don't mean that it's Mr. Comyn—and to think of my coming down by the area. I declare I don't know why I did it. How was your cousin, Lady Isherwood, Mr. Comyn, when you last heard from her? I really cannot imagine what Frederica was thinking of to bring you down here when there is a drawing-room up-stairs to sit in. You'll stay for dinner, won't you?—and just a little glass of sherry in the mean while."

Bernard had risen precipitately from the piano. "No, indeed, Miss Talmadge, I am extremely obliged, but I have an engagement this evening. I merely called to say good-bye before going abroad."

"Ah!" said Miss Talmadge, "you are about to visit the Continent. I have gone through all that, Mr. Comyn, and it has left its mark, for which I am thankful. I have spent many years of my life abroad, and have been repaid both in a social and intellectual sense, for the fatigue and discomfort of travelling. My circle of ac-

quaintance at the various places of resort in Italy, France, and Germany, has comprised the most eminent members of the aristocracy, and many distinguished men and women of letters. I knew how to seize upon advantages when they presented themselves, Mr. Comyn; and then the sights I have seen — that alone is sufficient to confer mental superiority. I have gone through eighty-four palaces and ninety-seven cathedrals, to say nothing of Art-galleries and museums."

Bernard held Esther's hand for a moment as he bade her good-bye. "You will have left school by the time I return," he said; and she fancied that there was a note of warning in his voice, and coloured deeply. "I hope that I may find you at Barwold, well and happy." He shook Frederica's hand warmly, took leave of Miss Talmadge, and departed.

"Frederica," said Aunt Theodosia, turning upon her niece with severe dignity, "the next time that a gentleman of Mr. Comyn's position pays me an afternoon call, I must beg that he is shown into the drawing-room, and not into a beggarly parlour next the kitchen. Not that this is not a very nice apartment," said Miss Talmadge, "and extremely comfortable, but it is hardly befitting a great-grand-daughter of the Earl of Glencairne. And when I think of

what I have gone through for the credit of my ancestry! The furniture of my drawing-room, which is handsome enough to grace the reception-rooms of a duke—all saved by scrimping and screwing, out of the merest pittance, it *is* hard that I am to reap no benefit from it.”

CHAPTER V.

THE ISHERWOODS IN WOODFORDSHIRE.

IN the early part of September, exactly two years after her arrival in England, Esther was standing upon the platform at St. Pancras Station, on her way to Barwold Court, where Sir Emilius and Lady Isherwood had again established themselves.

Esther had left school, and was now going to the only home open to her, though in what capacity she was as yet ignorant. From the tone of Sir Emilius' letters she had been led to infer that certain duties were expected of her. The nature of these duties she had yet to learn; but, with the remembrance of her grim reception in Berkeley Square still strong upon her, she had no pleasant anticipations of her entrance into her uncle's family.

It had not been found convenient to send Parkins to escort her, and Esther was travelling alone into Woodfordshire. The two years which

she had spent under Miss Binney's charge had taught her to be, to a certain extent, independent, and she was now much better able to take care of herself, than when she had made her forlorn journey from Australia to England. She had taken her ticket, had seen her luggage labelled, and was walking along the platform waiting for the train to come in, when a gentleman, followed by a porter with his gun-case and portmanteau, was knocked by a passing truck awkwardly against her, and lifted his hat with a concerned "I beg your pardon. These fellows are so clumsy." But the apology had been hardly uttered when it was replaced by "Esther! By Jove! it is you. Are you going down to Barwold?"

The speaker was Bernard. Esther flushed with surprise and pleasure. She had not seen him since that afternoon at Magenta Terrace, when he had bidden her and Frederica good-bye. Esther believed that he had been in Germany all this time, but intercourse between herself and the Isherwoods had been scanty. They had rarely written to her, and she had passed all her holidays with the Talmadges. Bernard looked somewhat foreign, as an Englishman does when he has lived for some time on the Continent, but he had not altered so much as Esther. She had grown certainly an inch, had filled out con-

siderably, and had lost much of the pleading, diffident expression, that had made her seem more child-like than she really was. Her eyes, though they were as large and as sympathetic as they had ever been, were brighter, and more full of interest in her surroundings. Her complexion, paler still than that of most healthy English girls, had a faint tinge of pink coming and going upon the smallest provocation, in a delicate, evanescent flush. She had also a more composed manner, as was becoming to a young lady who had spent two years under Miss Binney's discipline, who had gone through courses of diluted science, history, and polite literature, had learned to talk French after a fashion, and had imbibed a smattering of Italian and German. Her attainments had not gone far towards satisfying her mental cravings. She felt at times the sense of insufficiency, and of incongruity between her outer and inner lives, as keenly as she had ever done, but there had come to her a more definite estimate of her social attitude and position, and Frederica's unemotional companionship had been beneficial to her.

Bernard scanned her approvingly, pleased to see that she had that well-appointed look, which is peculiar to a certain phase of English young-ladyhood. It gave him satisfaction to observe that

she was plainly dressed, and wore no fringe, and that her gown was tied sufficiently loosely to admit of her walking with ease.

“Here, porter!” said Bernard, singling out an empty first-class carriage upon the line. “We’ll travel together, Esther, and I’ll give up my smoke for the pleasure of your company.” He handed her in, shoved his gun-case and portmanteau under the seat, and spread their rugs and umbrellas about the carriage, in the hope of preserving it uninvaded. The stream of travellers consisted for the most part of sportsmen, bound for the Eastern and Midland Counties, and who principally made for the smoking compartments; but just as the guard had closed the doors, a very small but very pretty young lady, attended by her maid, looked in, passed on, and returned, finally taking up her position opposite Miss Isherwood.

“Allerton,” said the guard, looking at the tickets. “All right; change at Woodchester.”

The occupants of the compartment thus became aware that they were each bound for the same destination.

The station-master gave the signal, and the train moved on.

Communication between Bernard and his companion, could not, under the circumstances, be of

a private nature ; for though one may have no objection to discuss one's affairs freely before one's neighbours, one does not usually care to do so before one's neighbours' servants.

Bernard asked Esther several questions about her school life during the last two years, and she in her turn made shy inquiries as to his travels and stay in Germany ; but conversation flagged, and presently he took up the *Pall Mall Gazette*, while Esther, being unprovided with literature, looked furtively at her companion opposite.

She was a very picturesque, piquante girl, scarcely more than five feet in height, and beautifully made in proportion, with bright dark eyes, a clear olive complexion, and great vivacity of expression. She was dressed in very good taste, in a brown serge costume touched with yellow, and a drooping hat and feather, and everything about her, from the châtelaine she wore, to the handle of the parasol she carried, suggested wealth and particularity. She was rather a restless young lady, addressing abrupt remarks to her maid, and looking at Esther as though she would have liked to launch into conversation. Probably Bernard's presence restrained her, for she took up a book instead, and when they changed trains at Woodchester, she got into another

carriage, and Bernard and Esther had one to themselves.

"That was a pretty girl," said Bernard. "I suppose she is a neighbour, as Allerton is her station as well as ours. I feel as though I ought to know her, but I can't recall her name."

Then he asked the sportsmanlike question, "You haven't heard anything about the game prospects at Barwold, I suppose, Esther?"

"I don't know anything about the game," replied Esther. "They haven't told me. I have only had one letter from Sir Emilius since they came back, and that was to tell me that I was to live with them."

"So you are to live with the Isherwoods for good. That is to be your life; I suppose now that Adelaide Comyn is married, Hermione wants another white slave."

"Was Adelaide Comyn a white slave?" asked Esther.

"That was my definition of her vocation. Some people may have thought it a very worthy one. She had good things to eat, and a certain amount of material comfort. Hermione occasionally gave her one of her own last season's gowns, and took her in a sort of 'poor dependant' way, into society. That was her reward for a martyrdom to boredom. I daresay that the murder of all

independent, intellectual existence did not hurt Adelaide much, and she was too thick-skinned to mind being scolded. You, too, may be satisfied with your lot."

"I am wondering what I shall have to do."

"I can tell you off, a few of your duties. In the first place, you must submit to consider things generally, from the dead level of millinery. You will have to read *Le Follet*, or the *Court News*, aloud to Lady Isherwood every day for two or three hours, while she executes feeble art patterns in crewels upon coarse towelling. You must always be within call, ready to write notes, and to put in a suggestive word as to whether it is too wet, too hot, too cold, too windy, or too anything else, for driving in the brougham or the open carriage; but you must use great tact, and listen deferentially to endless discussion, for Hermione likes her dependants to keep their places. You must bear with patience a great deal of irritable comment upon your own conduct, and upon that of other people. You must be quick to co-operate with Hermione in any idea that may have struck her weak brain, as to the retrimming of her last season's gowns. You must never be out of earshot at any time in the day, except when you are sent out to look for Floss and Wallenstein, who have an unfortunate

knack of losing their silver collars in the spinnies. Floss is a terrier, and Wallenstein is Lady Isherwood's pet dachshund. They both require a great deal of attention. You must never allow yourself to feel sick from being shut up in a close carriage, or from sitting with your back to the horses, and you must always agree with Sir Emilius when he talks about Art, and with Hermione when she talks against it. Happily he is so deaf that he will not notice what you say."

Esther laughed. "All that sounds wearisome, but not particularly difficult."

"Perhaps it is not difficult to a woman. It is debasing, from an intellectual point of view. Talking of Art, how is Miss Talmadge?"

"Frederica! She has been studying for more than a year at the Art School, and is getting on very well. I spent my last holidays at Magenta Terrace. Miss Talmadge keeps a better servant, and does not work quite so hard now that Frederica is at home and earns a little money."

"Poor girl! I like to see a woman modest and intelligent as she is, feminine and ladylike too—going in so independently for a profession—but I am sorry that she is obliged to work for her living."

"It is her ambition to make a home by-and-by for her two sisters. She did a portrait of me in

water-colours this summer. I have it with me. It is for an old sailor at Mundoolan Island who was very kind to me when I was quite young. Long ago, soon after I came to England, Frederica drew me in chalks, and I sent him the picture. He was delighted with it, but six months ago I got a letter from him, telling me that it had been destroyed in a great storm at the Pilot Station, when his hut had been blown down. I am sending him this one to replace it."

"You have not forgotten your old home, Esther."

"No," replied Esther gravely, thinking at the moment how impossible it was that some of those early memories should fade. "I could forget anything sooner, but Mundoolan Island must have changed considerably in the last two years."

"How?" asked Bernard. "I thought it was too desolate a place for civilization to approach it."

"Mrs. Overstone tells me—I hear from her sometimes — that coal has been discovered at Bully Wallah; that they are talking of a township upon the island; and that large works have been built which will make Mr. Overstone's fortune; and Mr. Lydyiard's colony is established now."

"Lydyiard!" repeated Bernard. "I wonder

if that can be a man I knew well, several years ago. He was a very ugly fellow, and much older than I am. I have lost sight of him lately, but I think I heard that he had been sending or taking a colony of emigrants out somewhere. He wrote a good deal about the Strikes' movement, and rather took the side of the leaders. You don't mean to say that he has established his settlers upon Mundoolan Island?"

"I think that the person you describe must be my Mr. Lydyiard. He stayed at Bully Wallah for more than a month, and was very kind to me at the time that my father died. I should like to see him again."

"I will look him up if he is in London now. It is strange how one drifts away from persons, who at periods of our lives have been strong agents in the forming of our convictions. I became acquainted with Lydyiard soon after I left the Navy. I think that his independence of ordinary social aims, attracted me."

"Do you think that it is a good thing to hold oneself aloof from others?"

"No," said Bernard. "But when one's principles are as yet undeveloped, it is natural and right to shrink from the responsibility involved in the influence, which one must more or less exercise upon one's associates. Lydyiard had

collected round him a set of independent thinkers. He wrote at that time for many of the leading journals. I always fancied that there was a story about his marriage, or something of the sort. He gave one the idea of being a disappointed man. Is this Allerton? Yes; so it is. I have not been in Woodfordshire for so long, that I have forgotten the line."

He handed Esther out, and went to see about her luggage. The young lady who had shared their carriage to Woodchester got out of the next compartment, and was met upon the platform by a footman who took her parcels and rugs, and placed them in a well-appointed brougham that was waiting in the station-yard.

"That is somebody for Allerton Hall," said Bernard, as he took his seat opposite Esther in the wagonnette that had been sent to meet them. "I remember the Welbys' livery."

"Who are the Welbys?" asked Esther.

"Old Welby is the Squire of Allerton and Master of the Grately hounds. His place is a mile from the station, and Barwold is three beyond it."

The name Grately struck Esther as familiar; but she supposed that she had heard it mentioned by the Isherwoods.

The country about Barwold, as in the Mid-

lands generally, was not picturesque, consisting for the most part of farmed land, and thin belts of wood. Bernard looked anxiously at the turnip fields as they passed. "There does not seem to be any show of partridges, and I am afraid that the old boy has not done much in the way of preserving this year. Charles used to look after that."

"How prim it is!" exclaimed Esther, to whom the English country was new. Her rural experiences had not as yet extended beyond walks in the suburbs of London. "And how like a garden. I fancied that when I got really away from town, I should see plains and forest, as one does in Australia."

Bernard laughed. "You can't get away from civilization in the Midland counties." They drove on through several villages—each in the transition phase between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, when modern manufacturing ugliness is placed side by side with the picturesque of old English architecture—till they wound round by a grey stone farmhouse, and little incline overarched by thick elms, on the top of which stood an ancient spired church covered with ivy. Beyond it, lay a straggling street, in which were rows of cottages, some modern, and some of earlier date, with thatched roofs, and

queer archways dividing them, over one of which was a shield, and an inscription in old English, "G. I. 1780."

"Your ancestor, Sir Giles," said Bernard. "Here we are at the entrance-gates. The Lodge deserted—and the place is not nearly so well kept up as it used to be; I am afraid that Charles's racing debts have made a hole in the Isherwood revenues which his prolonged tour in the East will hardly repair."

They drove up a winding avenue of alternate light and copper beeches, and came at the end of it, to Barwold Court, an irregular house built of dark grey stone, with deep, mullioned, diamond-paned bay-windows abutting on every side, and framed in Virginia creeper now turning to a deep crimson. It had little buttresses and battlements above the windows, and in the centre of the roof a quaint clock-tower. The building was of no particular period of architecture, having been added to at various times; but it had a picturesque look of antiquity, and just now the contrast of the pale grey stone streaked with black and the autumnal creepers was particularly charming. The oldest portion was coeval with the settlement of the Isherwood family in Woodfordshire in the thirteenth century. Though by no means palatial in size, Barwold

was large enough to contain a pleasantly numerous shooting party. The grounds were more old-fashioned and suggestive, than showy, and were deficient in the bedding-out element of geraniums and calceolaria. There was a smooth bowling-green behind, with a sun-dial at the end, and at each side broad gravelled terraces, on which were shrubs of magnolia, myrtle, and heliotrope in ornamental tubs. Cool shady walks turned round odd, grey stone corners, and wound in and out in labyrinthine fashion, till it was difficult to realize how comparatively small an area the house and grounds covered.

Sir Emilius had not arrived at the very highest pitch of modern æstheticism, but he insisted that everything within the house should be in keeping with its exterior. In the fire-places he would have no modern grates, nor might the harmony of the walls and floors be spoilt by any but the deepest and most subdued colouring. Large logs burned upon heaps of ashes on the wide hearths, and instead of marble mantel-pieces there were quaint structures, in black oak, that supported curious mirrors or pieces of antique China. He would on no pretence admit a picture or bit of ware of a later date than the previous century. Critics said that some of his ancient masters were spurious, and

that specimens of his Chelsea and old Worcester were scarcely as valuable as he supposed, but he piqued himself upon being the fortunate possessor of some rare Henri Deux, and that fact was sufficient to deify him as a connoisseur in China.

Parkins, as sleek and bland as of old, opened the entrance-door, and ushered Bernard and Esther into a large hall, panelled in oak, with *portières* of tapestry veiling the doors, and carved oak cabinets filling the recesses. On one side was a stained glass window, below which was a deep, cushioned seat. Two old-fashioned painted screens made a pleasing irregularity in the room, and a row of blue China dishes hung over the mantel-piece. A bright fire was blazing on the hearth. Before it, in a large arm-chair—fatter, fairer, and even more voluminous than when Esther had last seen her—sat Lady Isherwood, with a tea-table, upon which was a Worcester service, drawn up beside her.

On one side of the fire-place, Sir Emilius, shrivelled and lean, sat before a cracked spinet, from which he was extracting doubtful harmonies, as he poked his big nose forward and peered through his spectacles into a book of MS., extremely yellow and dilapidated, that stood upon the desk. He hardly looked up when they entered. "How do you do, Bernard?" he

said in his feeble way. "How do you do, Esther? Glad to see you at Barwold. It is as I thought," he added excitedly, turning over a page, and then going back to the fly-leaf. "Pray excuse me, Bernard; I am quite absorbed, as you see, in this new treasure. It has only just arrived. I think I may say with certainty that this music primer was used by Elizabeth Tudor. You see the autograph and inscription. The matter is beyond a doubt. The spinet itself bears the date of 1550."

"Where did you get it?" asked Bernard.

"Both the book and the spinet had lain for years in the lumber-room of a farm-house not far from Woodchester. I remarked them yesterday, and bought them for a mere song. The ignorance of the lower classes is something surprising. They have treasures under their very noses of the value of which they are quite ignorant. It is a mournful reflection that, in spite of our best efforts, it may be centuries before the glorious influence of Art and culture reaches the multitude."

"My dear sir, if the farmer and the farmer's wife had appreciated the spinet, they would not have sold it to you."

"True!" said Sir Emilius, in his melancholy voice, "but culture would teach that the sacred

relics of bygone Art should be concentrated, as it were, in temples accessible to all, and the members of the upper class—the aristocracy of wealth and refinement—should be high priests of the religion. It has a sweet tone,” and he played with three fingers a little quavering melody.

“1550!” said Bernard. “In those days they had not brought the construction of musical instruments to its present pitch of perfection. I hope you don’t mean it to supersede the Broadwood in the drawing-room. One ought to take advantage of modern improvements. Don’t you think so?”

Sir Emilius uttered a little groan.

“Now some people like modern innovations,” continued Bernard, provokingly. “There’s Dicky Ghetwode, Charles’s friend—you remember his shooting here with us four years ago. ‘Why don’t they put plate-glass in the windows?’ he said. ‘These little panes make the rooms so confoundedly dark.’”

Lady Isherwood nodded an assent. “Ah! such a nice young man, and so devoted to lace. He knew all about that, at all events; and he had the most perfect idea of combining colours. I must say, Bernard, that you are very sensible sometimes. China is all very well, as I tell

Emilius—and tapestry. They are the fashion; and really some of the designs in the old needlework are very pretty for antimacassars—but a torn music-book that Queen Elizabeth played out of—who cares for that? I thought of going as Queen Elizabeth to a fancy ball in Rome last winter; but when I wrote to Leoine about my dress she positively declined to make anything so unbecoming, so I went as Flora instead. Won't you come near the fire and have some tea?"

Lady Isherwood turned sharply round upon Esther who was standing in the rear of Bernard. "Why are you smiling? I don't think that Miss Binney has taught you good manners. It is very rude to laugh to oneself in company. Don't you think that Flora was a becoming character for me?"

"I don't know," said Esther, helplessly.

"It was a beautiful costume," continued Lady Isherwood. "Worth designed it. The corsage and the skirt were almost entirely covered with blush roses—I used to be called the blush rose when I was a girl. I am glad to see that you have improved in appearance. Now that Adelaide is married, and you have left school, you are going to be my companion. I hope that you don't object to reading aloud?"

"I like it very much, thank you."

"I think that it is a good thing to cultivate one's mind," said Lady Isherwood, pouring out two cups of tea, "so I subscribe to Mudie's, and get a box of books every month. Can you do crewel work?"

"I haven't done any yet, Lady Isherwood."

"Crash is much nicer to work upon than that other stuff that looks like towelling. I did this tea-cloth. Here is your tea, Bernard. There is some buttered toast, but I am afraid it is cold. A young artist in Rome designed the pattern; he said it was Etruscan. Emilius, what is Esther to call me?"

But Sir Emilius was too much engrossed with the spinet to heed.

"He is getting so deaf," said Lady Isherwood. "I think it is so inconsiderate of people when they won't hear. He is deafer than ever when he is on the antiquities. I'm sick of Art. Emilius!" in a louder tone. "Is Esther to call me aunt?"

"I suppose so, my dear, if you have no objection."

"I don't mind, if she *is* your brother's daughter, but I should like to be quite sure that her mother was a lady. What do they call the negro women out there? She might have been

a black creature for all we know. Call me Aunt Hermione."

"Aunt Hermione," said Esther, "my mother was a lady, and she is dead, and—"

"Highly-tighty!" interrupted Lady Isherwood. "You have become very much set up since you have been at school. I told you, Emilius, that it was a mistake educating the lower orders."

"My dear," expostulated Sir Emilius, "you don't grasp the position."

"What position? I don't see any."

"Esther is my niece, and I wish her to be treated well."

"I am sure I never wanted to treat her badly," said Lady Isherwood, snappishly. "She has got Adelaide's old room, and the upper housemaid has orders to wait on her."

"Hermione," said Bernard, "there was an extremely small, and very pretty, dark, young lady in the train with us to-day. She got out at Allerton, and 'drove off in old Welby's carriage. Was it a Miss Welby?"

"There is only one Miss Welby, Bernard, and she is very small. I am glad you thought her pretty. She will have plenty of money, and would just do for you. But they say she is going to marry a cousin, who has come in for that old Lord What's-his-name's property—the man who

died in the beginning of the year. Dear me!—it is extraordinary how living away from a place makes one forget the names of the people. At least I hear that he has got the Grately estate, but nothing besides; they say he has been wild.” Charles and Lina Welby did not get on,” pursued Lady Isherwood, “or she might have done for him.”

“I think that I’ll go and have a chat with Lewis,” said Bernard. “I want to hear about the partridge prospects, Sir Emilius. I saw very few covies as we came along to-day.”

“Not as many as there should be, Bernard, I’m afraid. I never shoot, you know. Charles used to look after the game. I have asked Clarke and Howard to come over two days next week, and you must give the tenants each a day. We can’t stand more than three guns.”

Bernard was walking off, but paused at the door, detained by Esther’s wistful glance.

“Hermione, hadn’t Esther better go up-stairs and see her room? I’m obliged to take a proprietary interest in her, for I brought her down. Shall I ring for some one to show her the way?”

Cullen was sent for, and Esther was taken up-stairs to the chamber intended for her future occupation. It was a pretty little room overlooking the terrace, with a deep window, and

more modern chintzes than were to be seen in any other part of the house.

"It was Miss Adelaide Comyn's," explained Cullen, "till the family went abroad. She was Mr. Bernard's cousin, and spent a good deal of her time here. She is married now, but she suited my lady very well. You'll find her wor-ritting, Miss," added Cullen in a friendly manner, pointing significantly down-stairs; "but the best way to get on, is not to mind when she is contrary. Miss Adelaide never paid attention to what she said."

By-and-by the housemaid came in and unpacked Esther's boxes. The girl dressed herself in a soft cashmere gown which Frederica had chosen. She looked very like a picture by Sir Joshua, in her square-cut boddice, with her deep, dark eyes, and sensitive mouth. Bernard, who was seated at the piano when she entered the drawing-room, looked at her admiringly.

Like the rest of the house, the drawing-room at Barwold was subdued and harmonious. The fireplace was wide too, and the chimney-glass was framed in dark oak. Flanking it, were two large blue vases standing out against a background of deep red. The walls were hung with crimson flock paper panelled in dead gold, but were so covered with quaintly-set miniatures,

brackets, china plates, and Venetian mirrors, that there was very little of their surface to be seen. On one side of the fireplace a Dresden clock with a swinging pendulum hung over a curious Italian cabinet ; on the other, a tier of inlaid shelves held a set of antique cups and saucers. The room was oddly shaped, by reason of two deep bay-windows, in the embrasures of which were low seats. The curtains and coverings of the chairs and couches were of a mediæval-patterned Cretonne. Upon a velvet-covered table edged with yellow point-lace was a tall vase filled with autumn berries and grasses, and a great bowl of dried rose-leaves and lavender. A dachshund and a terrier lay in crimson-lined baskets upon each side of the fireplace.

Presently Lady Isherwood rustled in, and then Sir Emilius entered in his abstracted way, and buried himself in the depths of an arm-chair, begging Bernard to continue his *pot-pourri* of German airs ; while every now and then, he would rise and alter the position of a vase or piece of China upon a table or bracket. He had been re-arranging the furniture, and had not yet got it to his liking, when Parkins announced dinner. He offered his arm to his niece, and they went into the dining-room, which was hung with tapestry representing the meeting of Ulysses and

Nausicaa, while over the sideboard and doorways were quaint brass shields bearing lighted candles that shed a dusky illumination in the corners.

Esther had brought down-stairs the portrait of herself drawn by Frederica for Joe Bride. Sir Emilius saw it upon the table when they returned to the drawing-room, and, inquiring who had executed it, began to criticise the painting. "The portrait is good," he said, adjusting his spectacles; "yes, it is decidedly good, and the attitude picturesque, but the background is weak and wanting in finish, and there is a lack of force and reality, which suggests that the painter had not a clear conception of the scene she wished to represent."

Esther was depicted standing in the attitude in which Frederica had long ago proposed to paint her—with her back to the rocks at the base of the lighthouse, and the sea creeping up towards her—but Sir Emilius' criticism was just; the portrait was striking, but the picture as a work of Art was a failure.

"Your friend has talent," said Sir Emilius, after a longer scrutiny; there is merit, certainly merit—but advise her to confine herself to portraiture. The work is wanting in atmosphere, the drawing is faulty, and the conception weak;

still I should say that there was promise in the picture. Where is the artist studying?"

Esther gave some particulars of Frederica's circumstances and aspirations, and finally produced a photograph of her friend. Sir Emilius was interested, and full of approbation.

"Such industry and desire for self-improvement should be encouraged," he said warmly; "and the talent that undoubtedly exists should be educated. It would be my wish to instil a deeper sympathy with the higher forms of Art, and to cultivate the critical and appreciative faculties."

"Why don't you ask Miss Talmadge here, Sir Emilius?" asked Bernard, suddenly. "She is a most lady-like, intelligent girl, and would be grateful for criticism. She is fond of music too, and plays extremely well."

"Ah!" said Sir Emilius. "I wonder if she would appreciate the spinet. But your suggestion is a good one, Bernard. I have long wished to have the family portraits copied on a small scale, to illustrate a little History of the Isherwoods I am preparing, from the first settlement of the family in Woodfordshire to the present century. The work is not an ambitious one. Its drawings would require a facility in reproduction, and a perception of the characteristic points

in each physiognomy. The project has been for a long time in my mind, but I have hesitated to employ an experienced artist, and no promising beginner has as yet come before me."

"Are you talking of having more pictures painted?" exclaimed Lady Isherwood, waking up from a nap. "I wish you would remember, Emilius, that I have only one pair of carriage-horses now to do all my visiting with, and that we have given up forcing. I am sure that grapes are of far more importance than the hideous black landscapes you are so fond of. We used to have such beautiful grapes and pines," she added, plaintively, "and now I don't know what I am to do for my winter dinner-parties."

"Oh, sir," said Esther, turning her large, grateful eyes upon her uncle, "do you really mean that you will give Frederica an order?"

"I see no reason, my dear, why you should not invite her here, and we can then decide upon the work."

"Emilius!" exclaimed Lady Isherwood, starting up in wrath. "If you think that I shall allow your niece to invite her friends here, you are very much mistaken."

"My dear, it is not a question of Esther inviting her friends; the young lady is an artist whom I am thinking of employing."

“You will find Miss Talmadge a most amiable and useful young person, Hermione,” said Bernard; “she has quite a genius for painting fans, and, I am sure, would design you table-covers and antimacassars by the dozen.”

Lady Isherwood received his remark in all seriousness.

“Well,” she said, “that alters the case. I am very fond of pretty fans, and I especially want one to match my last dinner dress. Cardinal satin touched with pink, and bouquets of pink bigonias for the hair and corsage. Really, Bernard, you can be quite sympathetic sometimes. A fan painted in bigonias would complete the costume.”

The suggestion was not suffered to die in the birth. Upon the following day Esther commenced her duties as secretary by writing, in Lady Isherwood’s name, a note which caused a considerable flutter in Aunt Theodosia’s bosom. She was convinced that at last the higher circles were awakening to a sense of her existence, and that the invitation to Frederica had been sent solely as a tribute to herself. She made a solemn expedition to her most valuable store of finery, accumulated during the visiting life, and brought forth an antique, mauve satin and necklace of garnets which she presented impressively to her niece.

“I understand, my love, the motive of Lady Isherwood’s invitation,” said Miss Talmadge; “and doubtless Esther has intimated to her aunt my love of retirement; but I must say, that it would have shown a more intimate acquaintance with the rules of etiquette, had Lady Isherwood addressed herself in the first instance to me. It would have indicated a sense of what is due to a great-grand-daughter of the Earls of Glencairne had I been given the option of acceptance or refusal of the compliment manifestly intended for me.”

CHAPTER VI.

UPON THE BRIDGE WITH BERNARD.

FREDERICA was prevented by her engagements at the Art School from accepting the Isherwoods' invitation for the following month of October, and as the family were going to town for a fortnight, early in November, it was decided that Miss Talmadge's visit should be postponed till after their return to the country.

Bernard Comyn spent three weeks altogether at Barwold, remaining there for ten days after his first arrival, then going to Suffolk to shoot over the estate of a friend, and returning again later to Woodfordshire. But during the latter part of his stay, he was not so enthusiastic about the sport as he had been at first. The shooting at Barwold was poor, Sir Emilius never handled a gun, and Bernard found it dull work going out alone with a keeper. It was arranged that he should come down later in November for the destruction of what pheasants there were; and just now, it seemed a pleasanter occupation to

lounge over a book in the hall, or to stroll about the grounds with Esther, than to walk through endless turnip fields with the chance of but poor sport.

Esther found Bernard's *résumé* of her duties fairly accurate. The mornings were usually spent by Sir Emilius in his library over the Chronicle of the Isherwoods, and by the ladies in a boudoir in which Lady Isherwood dictated her notes, or wrote them with the aid of a Dictionary, discussed her toilettes, and the day's prospect of visitors, petted Wallenstein and Floss, and stitched languidly at her crewel work, while Esther read aloud the most vapid romances, impossible for the librarians to palm off upon any other subscriber than Lady Isherwood, whose intellectual tether they had measured with tolerable exactitude. "I don't know how it is: they never send me the books I order when people tell me of good ones," said Lady Isherwood; "but I suppose they know what I like, and I always impress upon them that I want the very best." Victorian literature, judging by Lady Isherwood's estimate of it, might indeed be considered at a low ebb. She had a devout faith in the efficacy of fiction as a means of mental improvement, but invariably forgot one day with what manner of food her mind had been

stored upon that previous. It had been Adelaide Comyn's habit, when a book was a little more exciting than usual, to read on to herself, and remove the mark a little nearer the end, or in like manner to skip when it was dull; but as long as the mark was placed between the pages, Lady Isherwood never discovered the fraud, and was under the impression that she fully earned the reputation of being a great reader.

Bernard's presence at Barwold had this effect upon Lady Isherwood, that she was more amenable to persuasion from him than from any one else; and when he asked, as he sometimes did, that Esther might walk with him, she seldom refused her permission, though she looked cross and grumbled afterwards.

Bernard's manner towards Esther was fraternal, but it is difficult to say whether his sentiments at that time were so also. How she interested him he would have found it hard to define; that she did so was indisputable. There was in her an absence of the transparent hypocrisies and the petty interests, which he had come, perhaps unjustly, to associate with his idea of young women. Though she did not speak much, listening rather when he or others talked, with a gentle inquiring attention, she gave him the impression that there were in her nature unsounded

depths and latent capabilities, and men of Bernard's type always prefer those women who, after a negative manner, furnish them with some food for reflection.

They were walking one afternoon, in a narrow path which led out of the avenue, and which was bounded upon one side by a line of beech trees, on the other by a running stream, called by courtesy the river, though it was in reality scarcely more than a brook. It was spanned by an old stone bridge that had been patched up by Sir Emilius as a picturesque bit, and beyond it, was a wood almost flame-coloured with the autumnal leaves. Esther and Bernard had paused against the low parapet of the bridge, and were looking down at the water.

"I wonder how I should feel," Bernard was saying, "if I owned a place like this."

Esther laughed. "I cannot fancy you in the least, an English landed proprietor."

"And I cannot imagine you an English *châtelaine*."

"I am never likely to be that," replied Esther, colouring slightly.

"Nor I a landowner ; but the question is more definitely settled for me than for you. A woman can never with any certainty predict her own future."

“Do you think that we are so unreliable?”

“Partly; and you are so much more dependent upon external circumstances than we are. Now I daresay that when you were a child upon the island, or even when you first came to England, you could hardly have believed that you would ever lead this sort of life, with relations whom you did not know.”

“Why can you not imagine me as an English county lady?” asked Esther, waiving his remark, which touched upon a painful spot.

“Some people are so entirely abstract, that it seems impossible that their natures could become pressed into any given mould. I think that you are abstract, but I hardly understand you. You strike me sometimes as being cold; at others I am surprised at your sensitiveness.”

“I do not think that I am cold,” said Esther, in a low voice.

“You don’t take my meaning quite. Perhaps I mean that you are more intellectually than physically emotive. But I have seen you once deeply moved by the sight of some one you knew or cared for. Do you remember that day at Burlington House?”

“Yes!” said Esther.

“May I ask whether you have since met that—the person whom you saw then?”

"No," answered Esther, in a low tone; "I have not."

"It must have been a disappointment to you," continued Bernard, with irritated curiosity.

Esther moved a few paces down the bridge. The repugnance to speak of George to Bernard seemed stronger than ever.

"I beg your pardon," said Bernard piqued; "I see that you dislike the subject. I am sorry I vexed you by mentioning it."

He picked up some stones that lay upon the coping of the parapet, and flung them one by one into the water. Esther returned to him.

"I am not vexed; it is you who are annoyed."

"Don't be annoyed with me," she said, in the child-like manner which had won him over before. "I hardly know why I dislike the subject. It cannot matter to you. I am foolish perhaps to mind now what pained me long ago; but I don't forget easily. It does not seem right to forget. Mr. Lydyiard used to say, that what we have felt or done in the past must always bind our lives."

"It is difficult to believe that you can have had any past of that kind," said Bernard, looking at her with interest and surprise. 'This exaggerated view of what he imagined to have been a foolish love affair, when she was too unformed

for it to have impressed her very deeply, was incomprehensible to him.

"You think the same," said Esther. "You said the other day that we ought to live to ourselves till we were quite sure of our own principles, lest we should influence others — wrongly perhaps."

"I think that it is other people's actions in the past, that influence our lives more than what we do ourselves," said Bernard; "and the convictions that seize upon us somehow, and hold us so firmly, that we should be traitors if we defied them."

Esther glanced up at Bernard inquiringly and sympathetically. He met the unspoken question in her eyes, and answered it impulsively. "Something happened to me eight years ago, just at the time when I was most enthusiastic. I had begun to look upon myself as an appreciable unit in the scale of creation, and had extreme convictions upon the subject of marriage and the responsible attitude one assumes towards humanity in general, by one's choice of a mate. I will tell you about it if you like."

"I thank you," said Esther, simply.

"I cannot enlarge exhaustively upon my theories," continued Bernard, still looking down at the water, and every now and then casting a

stone into the shallow stream. "I suppose it would be an odd subject to talk about to a young woman. I came to the conclusion that it was a good thing for a man of my age to marry, provided that he got the right kind of wife. There are such different ways of setting about it. Some men fall in love with a pretty face; others marry because they think it the correct thing to do; others drift into it. Then there is the motive of improving one's fortune or position, and the wish to be adored, or to adore, and so on; but, having made up my mind to marry, I determined to combine reason and inclination; only to choose a woman I could love, and to avoid all who were sentimental, irrational, sickly, or merely common-place. Why are you smiling? You think me very conceited. I had better not go on."

"I was only thinking that it sounded rather like the Grand Bashaw taking everything for granted. How could you tell that the woman you liked would like you?"

"One does not think of that when one is composing one's ideal. Besides, there is a fatality in those things. Love begets love; and, ten chances to one, if the woman is cold the man will find he has mistaken his ideal. At Montreal I met a sweet, feminine, intellectual girl who interested

me immensely. She was the daughter of a Canadian merchant. We were a good deal thrown together, and I fell in love with her, and determined, as soon as I was sure of her feelings, that I would ask her to marry me. Everything seemed smooth and prosperous. We sleighed together, played duets together, studied German together, and spent hours each day in each other's company. There was a mutual understanding between us. I had felt my ground, and she knew what was in my mind, but we were not actually engaged. The very day upon which I had intended to speak definitely, a crash came. Her father was declared a fraudulent bankrupt. Horrible things came out about him. He disappeared, and was found drowned. It was supposed that he committed suicide."

Bernard paused.

"And you?" asked Esther, eagerly. "Did you go to her? Did you speak?"

"I went to her," said Bernard, slowly. "I did everything for her that I could. To be with her under the circumstances, was deeply painful, but I could not add my desertion to her other troubles. When she was settled in a new home—she was adopted by an aunt in England—I said good-bye to her."

"Why?" asked Esther. "She was not to blame."

“You think that I was wrong and unmanly ; I could hardly have expected that you would have any other opinion. It is the fashion with novelists and sentimentalists to hold up to reproach the hero, who abstains from marrying the virtuous heroine, because she has inherited disgrace from her parents. I hold, and have always held, a different view of the case. A man has no right to run the risk of transmitting to his children a taint either physical or moral. It is surely more noble to renounce personal gratification, than by weakly pleasing oneself, to incur the responsibility of entailing suffering and vice upon future generations.”

Bernard spoke with curt decision. Like a sudden wave, there swept across Esther's mind the thought of her own doubtful antecedents. Was it possible that Bernard could have intended his words to carry any personal interpretation ? Ever since her arrival in England, Esther had had a vague knowledge of the fact that her father's life had been under a cloud. The few hints which had been dropped in her hearing, and her uncle's injunction to reticence upon her past history, had confirmed the impression. She knew that her father had been a drunkard and had committed suicide ; but what was it that had driven him away from England in the first

instance? Had her mother known his secret? Was it a crime which had forced him to change his name, and which, now that he was dead, made the mention of him disagreeable to his brother?

Bernard's next words cut her like a knife.

"I see, Esther, that you take the sentimental view of the position, and have no sympathy with the one who gives up his own joy for the sake of a general good. The heredity of moral disease has been as clearly proved as that of physical, and the man who marries the daughter of a thief or a murderer, is practically as guilty as he who takes for a wife the daughter of a lunatic or a dipsomaniac."

Esther started, and moved on a few paces. "I see—I see," she said hurriedly. "Both must suffer for the sake of right. If there be error, it is best to err on the side of self-sacrifice. Indeed, I would try to choose the highest lot, even if it were the hardest."

At that moment a carriage, dimly discernible through the trees, drove up the avenue.

"I must go," exclaimed Esther. "Aunt Hermione was expecting visitors, and there they are."

Bernard joined her, and they walked up to the house. The carriage was driving from the door

as they approached, and in the drawing-room Lady Isherwood was entertaining two ladies.

The elder one, whom she introduced as Mrs. Welby, seemed only to need a rosy cherub upon her lap in order to pose perfectly as one of Raphael's placid, dignified Madonnas. Her face had a serene impressiveness, conveyed in the large violet eyes, the arched brows and forehead, and the smoothly banded, fair hair, that was very striking. Her drapery was rich and flowing. She wore a large cross upon her breast, and talked in mellifluous tones that reminded one of the subdued swell of an organ through vaulted cathedral aisles.

"Dear Lady Isherwood," she was saying when Esther and Bernard entered, "we are so delighted to hear that you have a niece with you; young companionship is so pleasant."

Then she shook hands with Esther and bowed to Bernard, whom Lady Isherwood introduced; and Miss Welby, who looked smaller than ever, and had rather a gushing manner, advanced and greeted Esther with effusion.

"Of course I guessed who you were, in the train, the other day, and was longing to speak to you, but the traditionary reserve of the English miss prevented me. Don't you detest the English miss? I do. I hate everything

that is formal, and conventional, and the correct thing—except luncheon. Mother, darling, don't look at me so reprovably; you know very well that the day is my luncheon, and my luncheon is the day to me—except dinner; I like dinner better, I think, if somebody nice takes me in—but there is a solid satisfaction in one's luncheon that is very comforting. You don't know Woodfordshire; do you, Miss Isherwood?"

"No," answered Esther, amused at this ethereal young lady's appreciation of her meals. Miss Welby looked as though she had lunched off the wing of a lark. "I have only just left school."

"Oh! Do you know, I fancied that we were about the same age, but now I see that I must be years older, for I have been out for ever so long. Oh! it is too far back to remember. Mr. Comyn, I think that I danced with you once at the Woodchester Hunt Ball, but you have forgotten me, and now I feel so awfully shy of you, I should not know in the least what to begin talking to you about. This is a very stupid county," she went on, addressing Esther. "At least I find it horridly boring. When hunting begins next month, it will be duller than ever, for then the men are out all day, and go to sleep in the evenings, and we ladies have no horses to do anything with."

“You don’t hunt?” asked Bernard.

She made a grimace. “No indeed; my father thinks that noble sport should be a monopoly of the male sex. It seems to me, Mr. Comyn, that you men have the best of it. Everything that is lively and inspiriting falls to your share. You can shoot, fish, hunt, smoke cigars, drink brandy and water, and swear; whereas we poor creatures, if we are bored and want amusement, are condemned to clerical garden parties, weak tea and muffins, and parochial excitement. If you ever ride through Allerton in the winter you will see me stumping about on pattens, with a village basket on my arm and a hymn-book in my hand. I know that I am always a frump more or less, but on these occasions my frumpishness surpasses itself.”

The remark was manifestly intended to call forth a disclaimer.

“When I hear a young lady speak of herself as a frump,” exclaimed Bernard, “I am certain that she means something particularly piquant, so I shall ride through Allerton every day, Miss Welby, till I have satisfied myself with a sight of you in your parochial character. So you carry tea and sugar to the old women?”

“Yes; and snuff and tobacco. The parish widows may have a pipe on the sly, though we

poor misses are denied that luxury. I read them hymns in the broadest Woodfordshire. Perhaps you think I can't talk it, Mr. Comyn. Well, this is what they say—'You be's a foine scholar, Miss Lina, you be. Yoi beats our Rector foine, and there's not many would match his discoorse if they troied.' Then at Christmas time there are the tea-drinkings and the widows' feasts, and the Church decorations. Are you High or Low Church, Miss Isherwood?"

"I don't think I ever thought about it," replied Esther.

"You'll have to follow your Rector's lead; but he is of the 'two and two make four' order. I think it would be such a comforting variation if they'd only say, 'three and one make four.' Sometimes we are high, as high as it is possible to be, consistently with Anglicanism. Darling mother is next door to a Roman Catholic. She would like to set up a Confessional at Allerton, and to put Dr. Lightner into vestments. She always wears black in Lent, and last Good Friday she went to morning service—matins she calls it—in the deepest funeral garb. 'Darling mother,' I said, 'why this panoply of woe? Have we lost our nearest and dearest?' but the sweet angel silenced me with one of her pained, ecclesiastical looks, and presently old Lady

Elizabeth Lightner waddled up the aisle in a blue gown ; it was very shocking. Do you go in for church decorations, Miss Isherwood ? ”

“ I have had no experience,” said Esther. “ I never went to church till I came to England three years ago.”

“ You see, Miss Welby,” said Bernard, “ that you have a perfectly unenlightened mind to improve.”

Miss Welby looked puzzled. “ Then you have lived abroad. I was at school in France, but there we had even more church than one has in England, and the sisters were so sweet. Oh, Miss Isherwood, how delightfully fresh you must feel ! What a comforting person I shall find you. Nothing that I say will ever shock you.”

Tea was brought in, and Bernard creamed and sugared Miss Welby’s cup, while Mrs. Welby turned her velvety eyes upon Esther. “ Lina is looking forward to seeing a great deal of you, Miss Isherwood, if dear Lady Isherwood can do without you sometimes. It has been a dull year for her, for you know, dear Lady Isherwood, our trouble at Grately last winter. The dear old lord’s death was a sad trial. A death in the family is always distressing ; but we must remember the ever-yawning grave, ready to swallow

up those we love, and repress our murmurs." Mrs. Welby uttered this exhaustive reflection in the most placid of voices, and settled her dress as she spoke.

"Mourning is always trying," said Lady Isherwood, "especially to dark people. The property went to a nephew, did it not?"

"The Grately property was left him, but I grieve to say nothing else. I fear that dear George will have a difficulty. It is always such a pity when land is divided from personalty. You don't know our nephew, I think, dear Lady Isherwood."

"I never saw him that I remember."

"He has lived abroad a good deal. His regiment has always been quartered out of England. Latterly there was a misunderstanding, but, to be sure, you were not at Barwold. The dear old lord was very particular in his notions. In these days of laxity, I am sure that one cannot be too strict, but I think there was misrepresentation—George is such a dear, impulsive fellow. We hope to have him with us this winter. Dear Lady Isherwood, did you bring any pretty things with you from Paris? I have a head-dress about which I long for your opinion."

"I feel like a fly in a honey-pot," whispered

Miss Welby to Bernard, "when mother and Lady Isherwood get into the subject of dress." "Mammie, dearest," she added aloud, "you must remember that we dine eight miles off to-night, and that father fusses if we keep the carriage waiting."

"Yes, love," said Mrs. Welby rising. "I want you all to come and dine, dear Lady Isherwood. My husband is longing for a chat with Sir Emilius; and the spinet—I have heard of it—so very curious and interesting. I wish he were here to show it to us."

After a little more talking it was arranged that the Isherwoods were to defer dining at Allerton till after their return from London.

"Now remember," said Lina, shaking Esther's hand warmly, "you are going to be a great comfort to me; and when you come back again we must do all kinds of things together."

The Welbys drove off. Presently Sir Emilius came in from the library where he had been arranging some pictures, and asked for a cup of tea.

"I want some some one to help me," he said, looking round for Bernard, but Bernard had left the room. "Esther, perhaps you have a straight eye. If you have no objection I should be glad of your assistance."

Esther followed her uncle into the library, and patiently held up one by one a collection of rare, old prints that he had lately purchased.

But it was later than he had thought, and the light was bad.

"Thank you, my dear," said Sir Emilius; "I thought that I might have hung a few, but it is getting too dark. I can see by the way you handle the prints that you have a feeling for Art. Now tell me which of them you prefer?"

Esther pointed to a graceful, female figure, which had struck her because she fancied that it resembled her dead mother.

"Quite right," said Sir Emilius, nodding. "That is, I think, the best one in the collection. I am glad to observe that you are gaining in appreciation of what is beautiful and artistic. I have noticed it upon several occasions, and have felt gratified. It shows that you are one of us; but," he added, abstractedly, and with a tone of great sadness in his voice, "it is not surprising. The taste is inherited. Your father had a true love for Art. Had he not thrown away all chances of cultivating his talent he might have been a remarkable painter."

Esther's heart throbbed. The opportunity for which she was inwardly longing had come without her seeking. Sir Emilius had himself

introduced the subject of her father. She was panting for information, and a crowd of questions came rushing to her lips.

“Why did he throw away his chances?” she cried, tremulously. “Why do you always speak of him as though he had done something wrong? Why did he go to Australia, and conceal his name?”

“It was necessary that he should go away,” said Sir Emilius.

“Necessary,” repeated Esther. “It could not have been necessary for him to leave England, his home, unless he had done something of which he and you were ashamed.”

“My dear,” said Sir Emilius, taking his niece’s hands, and looking kindly, but sadly, at her questioning face, “do not ask anything about your father. He was never one of us. He was estranged from his home for years before he became practically dead to us. I am thankful that it was so; it is easier to bury the memory of his disgrace. There were but two of us, and I am the representative of the name he dishonoured. My own wife knows only that I had a brother with whom I was at enmity. It is best that you should forget everything else.”

“How can I forget?” asked Esther, her lips quivering. “I cannot alter the fact that he was

my father. If I have inherited disgrace it is right that I should know it."

"You feel it," said Sir Emilius. "It is the Isherwood pride which could never brook shame. In an old family which has always been honoured, there is nothing so terrible. It should be concealed from the very members themselves. Your father was right to change his name; he was unworthy to bear it."

"But you allow me to bear it," said Esther; "I am his daughter."

"My dear, when Robert wrote to me, entreating me to befriend his only child, I felt that I could not refuse his prayer. Age makes us softer, and I have had troubles with my own boy. It seemed unjust that the innocent should suffer for the guilty. And you were a girl—I had a sister, who died young, called Esther, and that inclined me towards you. And I am fond of you for your own sake, my dear; I do not think that I shall ever regret having brought you into my family. You had better go back to the drawing-room, it is too dark to do anything more with these pictures; but thank you for your help. Don't speak to me again about your father; the subject is painful to me. Stay; since you like it, my dear, you may take away that Bartolozzi print; I will give it you."

Esther silently took the picture and departed.

CHAPTER VII.

IN MR. LYDYIARD'S CHAMBERS.

"ESTHER has never seen a Lord Mayor's show," exclaimed Bernard. "We must certainly take up our positions somewhere in Fleet Street to-morrow, and see the sight. Do you hear, Hermione?"

Bernard was dining in Berkeley Square; the house had been partially reopened for the convenience of the Isherwoods during their short stay in London, and it was the day before the civic pageant, of which Esther had just confessed her ignorance.

"I don't see, Bernard," said Lady Isherwood, crossly, "why you should propose such a thing on Esther's account. Young women are not usually consulted before their elders, and I have other plans for to-morrow. No one goes to see the Lord Mayor's show except servants and children."

“Esther is a child. Nonsense, Hermione ; you are as keen as anyone for a lark when you arrange it yourself. There is to be no end of tinsel and flummery to-morrow. I am sure that you would enjoy the allegorical procession, and the car drawn by milk-white steeds ; to say nothing of the Lord Mayor and the Lady Mayoress in their robes of state.”

“I went to a civic banquet once,” said Lady Isherwood, thoughtfully. “It was very amusing. The people did all kinds of curious things, and the aldermen’s wives were dressed so oddly ; but if we go to-morrow we must have a window to sit at.”

“I think that I can arrange it comfortably,” said Bernard. “I have a friend whose chambers are at the corner of one of those streets leading into the Embankment from the Strand. Esther, you remember our talking of Mr. Lydyiard ; I mean him. He is in London, and I saw him the other day.”

“Mr. Lydyiard,” exclaimed Esther ; “oh, I should like to see him again. Does he know that I am in London ?”

“No,” said Bernard. “We met hurriedly the other day, and I did not mention you. Perhaps you would rather the meeting should be a surprise. I won’t tell him when I arrange about

luncheon to-morrow, that you are to be one of the party."

"No," said Esther; "I wonder if he will remember me."

"What does Esther know of Mr. Lydyiard?" asked Sir Emilius. "I am acquainted with him; a man not given to friendship with young girls, I should fancy, Bernard."

"He took out a colony of settlers to Mundoolan Island," explained Esther. "He was there a month inspecting the land, and he was very kind to me."

Sir Emilius avoided allusions to the island, and the conversation was turned.

There was no difficulty in arranging the little luncheon party, and upon the following morning Bernard called for the two ladies, and they all drove together to Lydyiard's rooms. Their host met them on the landing. Esther was introduced as Miss Isherwood, but her old friend bowed without recognizing her. This was not surprising, for the girl had her veil down, and her dress and deportment were very different to those of the Esther of Mundoolan Island.

The tiny hall was decorated with curios in the shape of spears and arrowheads from the South Seas which Lydyiard had collected during his wanderings, and which immediately attracted

Lady Isherwood's attention. She was like a child in her admiration of anything new, and was particularly charmed with some festoons of native beads that hung from the ceiling. "How pretty!" she exclaimed. "Now, if Emilius would only get some of these things for Barwold instead of those stupid China plates and carvings how much more interesting it would be! What delightful ornaments for a fancy dress! *La belle sauvage!* Are there ever fair savages, Mr. Lydyiard?"

"I have seen some in England, madam," said Lydyiard, leading the way into the front sitting-room which looked on two sides towards the street. Here luncheon was laid upon a round table, and seats placed in the windows for the convenience of the sightseers.

"Is it not a very noisy situation?" asked Lady Isherwood.

"My study is at the back," replied Lydyiard, "and is quiet enough, and I like the roar of the City better than the fashionable dulness of the West End; but these rooms are merely a temporary abode, Lady Isherwood, and when the business which keeps me in London is ended, I am going to a milder climate."

Esther was standing apart from the others, and, as he spoke, raised her veil and turned her

eyes upon her old friend. He looked ill, she thought, certainly much older, and not less ugly than when she had last seen him; in truth, there was some suppressed irritation in his face. He was a little annoyed at having his quarters invaded by two fashionable ladies, though he had not liked refusing Bernard in whom he had once been interested, and had had, moreover, the inducement of giving pleasure to an unfledged school-girl, who had never seen the Lord Mayor's show; but he had not bargained for one as full grown as Lady Isherwood's graceful companion. After his first unrecognizing glance he had barely noticed Esther, who was trembling with suppressed excitement. Seeing her now standing alone at one of the windows, he left Bernard and Lady Isherwood together, and joining her, made a commonplace remark about the day. She turned, and looked him straight in the face.

"Esther!" he exclaimed.

"Bernard did not tell you. I wanted it to be a surprise. You did not know me. Oh, Mr. Lydyiard, I am so glad to see you again."

Lydyiard took her hand and pressed it between his own, regarding her with moistened affectionate eyes. "Yes, you are very much altered; it is not surprising that I did not know you, but now I see that it is quite the same face.

Of course I knew that the Isherwoods had placed you at school, and I had heard from Mrs. Overstone that you were well and happy, but I had not connected you in my mind with Bernard's cousin. My child, I am glad to see you, and I need not ask if you are well cared for. Your face and appearance tell me that."

Mr. Lydyiard's manner was warmer than it had ever been at the island. There, though he had been always kindly, and latterly even affectionate, there had been a gloom, and a touch of resistance in his interest, as though it were at war with some other feeling behind it. Nevertheless, Esther had always felt drawn to him by a strong instinctive sympathy. She did not know why she should have any particular affection for this ugly old man, any more than she might have felt towards Mrs. Overstone or any other who had been kind to her. She did not know of his proposal to adopt her, and she vaguely fancied that his attraction for her must be a result of his association in her mind with the recollection of George Brand. Her heart was throbbing with the longing to hear him mention her lover; she felt that an allusion to, and perhaps information about, George would naturally come from him. Lady Isherwood called sharply to her niece to fetch her a wrap, and Lydyiard took

Esther's hand and led her forward. "Lady Isherwood, I find that your niece and I are old friends; we have met in Australia. You must not be surprised at my monopolizing her somewhat; I have a great deal to tell her of her old home."

Bernard handed his cousin the shawl for which she had asked, and Lady Isherwood threw it petulantly over her ample shoulders. She was annoyed because Bernard had been looking at Esther instead of listening to her remarks, and now, to see her niece absorbing their host's attention was peculiarly distasteful to her. She was like a child in her inability to conceal her vexation, and answered crossly. "Sir Emilius does not like Esther to talk of Australia. She was a perfect barbarian when she came to England, and we have gone to a great expense in having her educated, and in making her presentable. She is one of Emilius' fads, and I don't think she is properly grateful. Her father was a disgrace to the family, though I never could make out exactly what he did, and we know nothing at all about her mother, who was most likely a negro woman."

Esther felt the almost convulsive pressure of Lydyiard's fingers, as her hand still lay in his. He drew the girl closer to his side, as though she

had a claim upon him which he wished to make evident, and replied coldly. "No, Lady Isherwood, I must correct you; Esther's mother had as pure blood in her veins as the most high-born of your friends. She was a lady by descent and manners, and her daughter resembles her. Pardon me, I think that you are hardly at a right angle for seeing the procession as it comes down the Strand; let me turn your chair a little."

He moved the position of the seat, and drew Esther to the other window, and before Lady Isherwood had recovered her surprise, the thickening crowd and distant shouting announced the approach of the spectacle, and diverted her attention to the scene in the street.

It was on Esther's lips to ask Mr. Lydyiard whether he had ever known her mother, but something in his face, as she glanced wistfully towards it, checked the inquiry. She tightened her grasp of his hand in a childlike way, and he, looking down at her, said in a soft voice, "I am glad indeed to have you with me, Esther; tell me, is your uncle kind to you?"

"Yes," she replied, in a low tone, which the noise in the streets rendered inaudible to the occupants of the other window. "He is an old man, and loves pictures and China better than anything in the world, I think; but he is very

good to me, and wishes me to be treated as though I had always been one of the family. You must not judge hardly of Aunt Hermione. She is like a child; no one minds her much; it is her way to be cross, and to say out what she thinks."

Lydyiard smiled. "It is an uncomfortable 'way' for you, I'm afraid."

"I'm getting accustomed to it. Uncle Emilius does not like me to talk of my father, or to speak to strangers of my early life. Of course you know all about it, but that was what Lady Isherwood meant. Mr. Lydyiard, I would give the world to know what it was that obliged my father to go to Australia. It was something dishonourable. My uncle told me so much, but he would tell me no more."

"Sir Emilius was right," said Lydyiard. "You are better in ignorance. Now look, Esther, the procession is coming."

The pageant moved slowly by, and presently Lydyiard and Bernard changed places, and the latter began pointing out to Esther the principal features of the show. "I have been giving Hermione a lecture," he said, when it had passed. "I hope Lydyiard will smooth her down a little; he is a good fellow. How fond he seems of you! Did he know your mother?"

“I cannot tell. His manner made me fancy that he must have known her. I want to ask him. I have so much to say to him if I could but get the opportunity.”

“I’ll try and manage it for you, but I must throw a bait for Hermione.”

Luncheon was served. Lydyiard was diplomatically attentive to Lady Isherwood, and made himself so agreeable that she asked him to pay them a visit at Barwold during the following month.

“I don’t shoot, Lady Isherwood, nor do I hunt, but I should like to take advantage of your invitation for a day or two, and renew an old acquaintance with Woodfordshire. I am very busy just now purchasing and sending out machinery and farming implements for my colonists upon Mundoolan Island.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Esther. “Mrs. Overstone told me that your emigrants were settled on Bishop Meddlicott’s selection, and that coal had been discovered on Bully Wallah.”

“Yes; they are settled, and very happily, I think. Mundoolan Island is progressing so rapidly that there is a talk of building a township, which is to be the seaport of Northern Australia. Your friend, Mr. Overstone, has given up the study of salt and of irrigation for

that of coal-mining. He has a great many views upon the subject, chaotic at present ; but he hopes to sit again in Parliament, and prove them to the satisfaction of the Legislative Assembly, and when he has made his fortune he is going to bring 'the missus' to England."

"Is it long since you came back from the island?" asked Esther.

"Only a few months. I was in Australia for some time. It may be my last visit, and I was anxious to do all that I could for my settlers. I have some sketches of the island which perhaps you would like to see by-and-by, Esther."

Bernard, who was playing one of Chopin's mazurkas in a *sotto voce* manner, turned upon the music-stool. "Hermione, it has just struck me that there is an afternoon performance at the 'Gaiety' to-day. I have had a ticket sent me for it. Would you like to come and risk the chance of getting another stall?"

"I dare say that the theatre won't be very crowded. Yes, Bernard, we will go. Why did you not mention it sooner? It is so long since I have been to a play. Is it Little Don Cæsar de Bazan? They say Kate Vaughan's dancing is wonderful, and she always dresses so exquisitely."

"I'll take you," said Bernard heroically. "If we can't get another stall we must come back.

I dare say that we shall manage it somehow. Esther had better stay and chat with her old friend. Lydyiard, you will see Miss Isherwood home ?”

Lady Isherwood was too eager for her amusement, to put forth any plea of impropriety that she might otherwise have urged against leaving her niece alone with Lydyiard. So venerable and so ugly a person must surely be harmless. She only stipulated that Esther should be in Berkeley Square before five o'clock, and then set off with Bernard for the theatre.

“Now, Esther,” said Lydyiard, “we will have a quiet talk. Tell me, child, what you have been doing these two years.”

“I have been to school at Miss Binney's, at Lower Norwood.”

“And your holidays, I suppose, you spent with the Isherwoods at Barwold ?”

“No; they had shut up the house, and lived abroad. I spent my holidays with some friends—with a school friend who was very kind to me—at Kensington.”

“You were full of longing for knowledge. Have you found learning as pleasant as you thought it would be ?”

“I don't know, sir,” answered Esther, a little sadly. “I have learned a good many things, I

suppose, but nothing is quite what I fancied it would be. I was very miserable at school at first, till I made a friend, and that seemed what I needed. Since then everything has been different. I have read a good many books, and have seen sights which were grand and beautiful beyond what I had ever imagined. There were the pictures and churches, and great, busy London. I have missed the sea and the rocks, and the endless bush, and have sometimes felt cramped here ; but it has been in reality a far wider life."

"And at present, as far as you can see, your future will be passed with the Isherwoods?"

"It seems so, sir. I don't know of anything different that could happen now."

"Many things might happen. It is probable that you will marry at some time, but do not think too soon of that. Esther, you had thoughts of that kind when you left the island. Have they quite gone from your mind?"

Esther's lips quivered, and she replied with downcast eyes: "I have never forgotten ; but it has not rested with me. If he had cared or remembered, he would have come to me."

"You have never seen George Brand since you have been in England?"

"Once—for a moment in a picture-gallery—but he did not know me. I don't think he saw

me. Do you think that he has really forgotten me, or is it that he does not know where I am? If he had wished to find me, he might have written to the Overstones. Mr. Lydyiard, have you seen him?"

"No; I have heard of him. I have heard that his uncle is dead, and that he has inherited considerable property, though not as much as he had been led to expect."

"I have written to him," said Esther. "I wrote to him at his bankers in Sydney, as he had told me. I thought that he would have met me in England, but he never came. I waited and waited, and I grew ashamed. I am sometimes ashamed when I think of him. Mr. Lydyiard, I cannot explain—I hardly know myself what I feel about him."

"He has a facile nature," said Lydyiard, "one that receives impressions readily and lets them fade as easily. Esther, there is nothing for you to regret in losing George. He would not have made you happy. It is far better that you should forget him, as he has forgotten you."

"I cannot do that—I cannot forget what—what happened. He can never be like any other man to me."

"Would you care to see the sketches of the island?" said Lydyiard, fearing that he had

pained her, and hurrying away from a subject which there could be no use in continuing. "Come with me into my study, and I will show them to you."

He took her into a back room evidently consecrated to his private use. The table was littered with books and papers, and upon the open flap of the *escritoire* lay several loose sheets of manuscript. He opened a drawer and took out a bundle of Australian sketches and photographs which he laid before Esther.

She lingered over them with delight, making him point out on a rough chart of the island, which he had drawn up during his first visit, the exact whereabouts of his settlement, and asking questions about the emigrants, and the changes which had taken place, and about her old friends the Overstones, and Joe Bride and his wife.

"Nancy died of dropsy a year ago," said Lydyiard, and Joe is likely to remain head pilot. He lives in your old cottage, which has been rebuilt since the cyclone."

"And my mother's \grave?" asked Esther, "does Joe take care of it? He promised me that it should never be neglected."

"Joe tends it; it is as it used to be. I have a little drawing of the place. Would you like to keep it?"

He found in another portfolio, and handed to her, a sketch of the graveyard where her father and mother lay buried. What vivid memories it recalled ! Esther's tears fell as she looked at the drawing.

"You have an affectionate heart," said Mr. Lydyiard. "Your mother must have loved you dearly."

"You read her letters," said Esther ; "those which you gave me when you left the island. They must have shown you how good she was ; how dearly she loved me. Mr. Lydyiard," she exclaimed eagerly, "do you know anything about my mother ?"

She laid the drawing upon the table near her, and turned her appealing eyes upon him in a manner which made subterfuge impossible. But either from her eager excitement, or because her eyes were blinded with tears, she knocked over a small, closed frame that stood upon the table. It fell to the ground with a crash, and one of the hinges breaking, the locked case flew open and disclosed a miniature portrait upon ivory.

"Oh ! I am so sorry," began Esther, and stooped to pick it up, but her exclamation of regret ended in one of surprise, as she saw that it was her own mother's face that lay before her. She lifted the case and gazed at it intently, while

Lydyiard watched her, saying nothing. "Oh, Mr. Lydyiard, I see—I know—I only fancied from your words to-day that you knew my mother, now I am sure of it. Oh, why have you never told me? That is why I have always felt differently for you to what I have felt for any one else; I understand now. You did know her—when she was a girl—perhaps before she married my father. Perhaps you were"—Esther was going to say—"fond of her too," and then she remembered that Lydyiard must have been a young man then, and his affection for her mother could hardly have been the paternal feeling he had for her. She coloured and looked confused. "Oh, tell me about my mother!" she added breathlessly. "How beautiful she is here! This must have been done years ago when she was as young as I am now."

"Yes," said Lydyiard, speaking with a forced calmness. "That was done when she was about your age."

"I am right; you knew her well. You must have known her intimately to possess this. Was she—any relation of yours, Mr. Lydyiard?"

"She was not related to me."

"But she must have been a friend—a great friend. She looks sad even here. Was she always sad, Mr. Lydyiard? She would never tell me

anything about her youth. I do not even know whether she had a father or mother living. I have sometimes fancied that she was an orphan—like me. I have so longed to know something about her.”

Esther spoke with excited pleading that it was impossible for Lydyiard to resist.

“Was she always sad?” repeated the girl.

He looked at her intently, and answered, but with a certain slowness, as though to speak was painful to him.

“Your mother was always sad. Hers was a nature which, in youth passionate, exacting, craved more than it is in the power of humanity to bestow. She was impatient, emotional, imaginative. Such dispositions must always taste more or less of the bitterness of disappointment.”

“Tell me about her,” Esther continued, her sympathies and love still further aroused by the suggestion of a note that seemed to chime with her own nature; “you must know more, or you would not know so much. You must have seen what sort of life she led; you cannot refuse to tell me all that you know now she is dead. I loved her so. Even now, in the twilight, when I am alone, I sometimes fancy that she is near me—I think of her so often.”

“I cannot tell you much,” answered Lydyiard.

"She was an orphan of French extraction and good family, brought up by an aunt in England who died when your mother was seventeen. She was left friendless and almost penniless. It was at that time that I began to know her intimately."

"And you were good to her," said Esther naïvely. "I know that you must have been so, for it is your disposition to be tender to those in distress."

"I was not good to her," said Lydyiard, rising and speaking with involuntary agitation. "I was selfish, and thought only of my own pleasure; I fettered her by the weight of obligation; I bound her to me when she did not wish to be bound—when I had no right to shackle her life—I—"

"I think I can guess," said Esther, touching his hand in quick girlish sympathy, the whole story seemed so patent to her young understanding. "You wished her to be your wife perhaps. Ah! it was so. You cared for her, and she did not know, did not appreciate—one does not always appreciate where one ought—and perhaps afterwards she broke her word and married my father. Is not that the story which it pains you to speak about?"

"Yes," said Lydyiard, relieved by her girl-like solution of his somewhat incoherent self-accus-

ations. "You are right; it pains me to speak of it. She was bound to me; and she loved your father better."

"I can understand now," murmured Esther almost to herself, "why she wished me to live true to the past." She looked down at her mother's picture, and seemed lost in thought. The image of her father brutalized by brandy, violent, or morose, rose unpleasantly before her imagination. That her mother could have preferred such an one before Lydyiard, who, with all his plainness of feature, seemed to Esther perfectly love-worthy, was inexplicable. "It is strange," she said.

"What is strange? Were you thinking that had you been in your mother's place you would have chosen differently? You don't know. Think of your father as you saw him lying dead, and you will not wonder that he should have been preferred before one as repulsive to women as I must have been."

"You are not repulsive," exclaimed Esther, kissing his hand with a gush of affection towards him. "How can you think so? You attract me; you have always attracted me in a way for which I could not account."

"I am not your lover," said Lydyiard. "Women admire physical beauty in men; would you have

loved George if he had been ill-featured and misshapen? He bent down and kissed her forehead, and there was a tremble in his voice. "You are a winning girl, Esther. I daresay that you thought me strange and sometimes morose on the island, but I was fond of you from the first, though there were associations that made the sight of you painful to me. I am a man of strong impressions, and I have never been able to shuffle slipshod over my responsibilities, my convictions, or disappointments. Old age and ill health are creeping upon me, and there does not seem much to look forward to—very little present contentment, and the calmness of negation beyond. It would be sweet to me to feel that I had your young, trusting affection. I once wished to adopt you; but it was best that you should go to your uncle. If you were in any difficulty or trouble, Esther, you would understand why it would be more natural for me to help you than for any one else. We will talk no more of your mother, child; come and look at these drawings, and then I will take you home."

In the mean time Bernard and Lady Isherwood had gone to the 'Gaiety,' but the theatre was unusually crowded, and there had been a difficulty in procuring a second stall. They went to a Picture Gallery, a poor salve to Lady Isher-

wood's disappointment. She was particularly irritable and inclined to grumble at everything, and finally drove back to her own house while Bernard walked on to his chambers.

It happened that upon this particular afternoon Miss Talmadge became inspired with an immediate sense of her obligations to the higher social spheres, and as a graceful acknowledgment of Lady Isherwood's invitation to her niece, determined to call with Frederica in Berkeley Square.

Lady Isherwood, flushed and fuming over her disappointment and Esther's neglect, was seated in the drawing-room when Miss Talmadge was announced, and the quaint figure in its imitation sealskin and glacé-silk, its curls and nodding cock's-plumes, appeared in the doorway. Lady Isherwood was too naïve to conceal her impressions under the mask of good-breeding. She did not mean to be rude, but when she saw anything that surprised her she could no more help showing her astonishment, than she could avoid letting people see she was ruffled when she felt cross. She stared at Miss Talmadge, and made a scarcely perceptible nod, taking no notice of the outstretched hand in its baggy glove.

"It is possible," began Miss Talmadge, in her most polished manner, "that my name may

be unfamiliar to Lady Isherwood, whom I once had the pleasure of meeting as Miss Comyn, but I am certain that I have only to mention that of Lady Susan Starkie—”

“I never heard of her,” replied Lady Isherwood, blankly.

“Lady Susan Starkie,” declared Miss Talmadge, with emphasis, “was the most finished gentlewoman whom it has ever been my good fortune to encounter; and Providence,” she continued, with slightly raised tones, “has been pleased to elect that my lot should have been cast, during twenty years of my life, in those higher circles which it is not the privilege of all to enter. Lady Susan Starkie was, I believe, upon the female side, a connection of the Comyns, but she was more directly related to the Earls of Glencairne, from whom the Talmadges claim descent.”

“I remember your name,” said Lady Isherwood. “Sir Emilius asked me to invite a young person to Barwold to paint. I am sure we shall be delighted if she comes, though I hope her terms are not very high, for we have been reducing our establishment; and, as I tell Sir Emilius, there are other things—and grapes are of more consequence in the winter than Art; perhaps it is this young lady,” nodding at Frederica. “She looks

very nice, and my cousin Bernard says that he is sure I shall like her, but I don't know anything about the Glencairnes, or Lady Susan What's-her-name either. Sir Emilius is not at home, but if you will sit down—”

Miss Talmadge, red with indignation, seated herself bolt upright upon the edge of the sofa, and clasped and unclasped the fastening of her bag with a nervous excitement that was not common to her. “I was not aware of the motive of Lady Isherwood's invitation,” she said, her voice trembling with dignity. “Had I suspected it I should have hesitated before intruding here. It has never been the custom of the Talmadges to demean themselves by entering into questions of terms. Not but what the profession of painting is honourable to the highest, and Frederica's grandfather was in a position to be a patron of Art. My father was the most finished gentleman whom it was possible to see in any of the courts of Europe. As for *les petits soins* in which the gentlemen of this age are strangely deficient, he would as soon have permitted a lady to walk down-stairs unassisted, as to pick up her own handkerchief; one does not see such manners now.”

Lady Isherwood placidly put her feet upon a footstool, and eyed Miss Talmadge with a child-

like curiosity that seemed, to the old lady, the height of impertinence. Then there was a long pause, at the end of which Lady Isherwood remarked in her baldest manner, that "there was going to be a fog."

Miss Talmadge replied in her most stately tone, that she believed the weather prophets predicted a fall of snow, but that the atmospheric changes in England were difficult to calculate; and Frederica ventured to inquire if Esther were at home.

"She stayed behind at Mr. Lydyiard's," said Lady Isherwood, crossly. "We went there to see the Lord Mayor's show, and then Bernard, my cousin, took me to the 'Gaiety,' where we could not get stalls. I think it is very inconsiderate of the people at the Theatre not to keep some places in reserve. Esther is very thoughtless. Young women should consult the pleasure of their elders, but she thinks only of her own. I should have gone to Elise's to choose a bonnet if she had been here. Do you like Elise? But," with a glance at the structure which crowned Miss Talmadge's curls, "I don't suppose you go to her."

"In my visiting days," said Miss Talmadge, with dignity, "Elise was not in existence; and I was always considered the best-dressed woman in whatever society I graced with my presence."

“Oh!” said Lady Isherwood, with irritating phlegm, and a look of vacuous surprise. “Elise is very expensive, but it is nonsense to say that she hasn’t good taste. I shouldn’t have thought that you went out much now.”

“No,” replied Miss Talmadge. “My immediate circle of acquaintance has been of such a description as to render me independent of general society.”

“Oh!” said Lady Isherwood again, and turned to Frederica. “Are you fond of painting?”

“I ought to be,” answered Frederica, “for it is my profession.”

“I like professionals,” said Lady Isherwood. “Some, you know, one can’t receive, but artists and those people—we met a great many abroad—have always such good taste. I daresay it would be very nice to design one’s own patterns, but, to be sure, one can always have it done at a School for Art Needlework.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Stanhope Turner!” announced Parkins, and two of Lady Isherwood’s dear friends entered, and, after a chilly glance at Miss Talmadge, began talking about things and people non-existent for Aunt Theodosia. She sat for several minutes upright upon the sofa. Her back grew still stiffer, and her plumes nodded

with a kind of indignant protest. At last she rose and made a sweeping curtsey. "Frederica," she said, "we had better retire."

"I am afraid that Sir Emilius has not come in yet," said Lady Isherwood. She was a little overpowered by Miss Talmadge's dignity and wrath, though her slow brain did not see where she had offended. She held out her hand, but Miss Talmadge's back was turned. "You are coming to Barwold," she said to Frederica, "and if you are professional I am sure that I shall like you."

"The manners of society have changed since my visiting days," was Miss Talmadge's withering comment as she swept down the stairs. Esther was standing in the hall; Lydyiard had just escorted her home, and had driven off after seeing her enter. The girl rushed forward to greet her friends.

"Oh, you have been to see me, and I was out. But you will come up again to the drawing-room?"

"No, my love," replied Miss Talmadge, with the calmness of suppressed rage. "Lady Isherwood's drawing-room is no place for me. I know my position. I have not lived for twenty years among the highest aristocracy to be ignorant of that now—the highest aristocracy!" she

repeated with such emphasis that Frederica trembled.

“ Oh, hush ! ” she cried.

“ No, Frederica, I will not hush ; I am not afraid of being heard. It is not for a granddaughter of the Earls of Glencairne ” (Miss Talmadge always spoke of the Glencairnes in the plural) to be insulted by a low-bred commoner.”

“ Who has insulted you ? ” said Esther. “ Is it Aunt Hermione ? If it is—no one minds her.”

“ My dear, I am sorry for the low estimation in which your relatives hold you—to insult your friends—but I know what good breeding is. Do not trouble yourself, my love—I rejoice in a mind which is above being disturbed by such trifles. Come, Frederica, we will go.”

She swept away, leaving Esther looking bewilderedly after her retreating figure, and as they crossed the Square, Frederica could do no more than throw back an appealing glance at her friend.

Miss Talmadge’s anger had not subsided upon the following day. It showed itself in an increased dignity of deportment, and in such withering harangues as—“ Well, Frederica, I hope that you have had enough of Esther’s grand relations. There is no need to sit stitching at that merino gown any longer ; your old blue

serge will do very well for running backwards and forwards to the Museum. As for silk velvet facings, there is no need to cut up my best *visite*, though I hope you don't think that I grudge it you, my love. I wore it for the first time at Homburg, at the Princess Langenstein's winter receptions. That was something like society. But for home wear and going to church on Sundays I have got a bit of Cluny lace lying by, that will smarten up the neck and sleeves. To be sure it is not real, but who is to know that unless you tell them? In my visiting days," continued Miss Talmadge discursively, "it was thought a disgrace to wear a bit of sham lace. It was a thing to which, in my set, I never condescended. Half a guinea a yard, and real Valenciennes, that was my style—but things are altered now, as I had occasion to remark yesterday."

A double knock sounded through the house, and a carriage came to a stop before Number 13, Magenta Terrace. Instinct seemed to tell Frederica who were their visitors, or perhaps she had caught a glimpse of a gentleman's profile through the half-drawn blind. Her cheeks crimsoned, though she was angry with herself for blushing. Why should her heart flutter at the sight of Bernard? She had often thought of him since

that afternoon when he had brought her the book upon Art, and had sat with them in the twilight in the shabby, little parlour, in which Aunt Theodosia was now occupied with some homely employment. But he had glorified it for ever in her imagination. The very echo of his music seemed in the dusk to linger in the corners. She had read his book over and over again, holding it as a thing sacred. Ought she to return it to him ?”

“Up-stairs, Frederica,” said Miss Talmadge, with laconic energy. She had taken a peep through the blind, and was arranging her curls before the cracked mantel-glass. “To the drawing-room ; be seated, but whip the covers off the chairs, my love, if you have time.”

The carriage which Bernard had diplomatically borrowed, created quite a sensation in Magenta Terrace, and the sight of the numerous heads poked out of the opposite windows did much, in spite of Miss Talmadge’s professed indifference to her neighbours, to mollify her wrath. Bernard must be given credit for great tact upon the occasion. He had dined in Berkeley Square the evening before, and had heard both from Esther and Lady Isherwood of Miss Talmadge’s visit. When he laid Hermione’s card upon the table, and concocted a pretty fiction about a severe headache, which confined her to the house, Miss

Talmadge looked incredulous but softened. Lady Isherwood, Bernard continued, had commissioned him to apologize for her shocking memory. She had not remembered either Lady Susan Starkie or the Glencairnes, the day before. Of course, now she recollected that the former had been an intimate acquaintance, and Miss Talmadge a personage well known in the higher circles. She sent a thousand regrets that they were leaving London so shortly that she could not invite Miss Talmadge to dinner. Aunt Theodosia smiled quite graciously at last, and accepted the apology.

"It is not every one who has a memory like mine, Mr. Comyn."

"You must make allowances for my cousin," said Bernard. "The truth is that she is slightly odd—in the head, you know. Oh, nothing to speak of; but her brain power has not developed as it ought. There are such cases."

"One ought indeed to be grateful to an all-wise Providence for intellectual superiority," said Miss Talmadge with sublime conviction, "when one reflects that the growth of one's mental faculties is hardly under one's own control—but there is a great deal in hereditary influence, Mr. Comyn."

"Bernard turned to Frederica, who was looking

down in a confused manner unusual to one generally so serene. "You are coming to Barwold? Sir Emilius is so anxious to make your acquaintance, not only for the mere personal pleasure—I know you take too much pride in your Art to mind my saying so—but because he has some copying of family portraits which he thought of placing in your hands, but hardly liked proposing, in the first instance, till he knew whether you would care to undertake it. We came here to-day because we wished to make sure of you. I am going there next month, and am looking forward to meeting you."

"I should like to go," said Frederica shyly. She hardly knew how to answer Bernard's interested address, which thrilled through her, and made her feel pleasantly conscious and embarrassed. "I should like to be with Esther, and to do what Sir Emilius wishes, if he thinks my work good enough."

"Sir Emilius imagines himself a critic. I suppose he knows something about the matter. He saw your drawing of Esther, and thought it full of promise for the future. You see that you have done a great deal since I saw you last, though you were a little distrustful of your powers; you will go on improving."

"I am afraid that I shall never get beyond a

certain point. I have no real talent. I—I have a book of yours—I ought to have returned it long ago—but I did not know where to send it.”

“Oh, I have been in Germany—and I meant you to keep it; pray do so, if it is any pleasure or use to you. I have been working too, in my way.”

“Have you written your opera?”

“Not a line. But I have brought back a quantity of new music—satisfying, suggestive things—which seem to enlarge one’s musical horizon to an indefinite extent—some duets too, which I should like to try with you when you are at Barwold. I have been attending lectures, and going in for what you would think, I am afraid, dryasdust study, but it has taken hold of me. I have an object now to work for; but I won’t enter into details, for, in the first place, they are beyond the feminine range, and in the second, you might think me pedantic and over-ambitious.”

“I don’t think one can be too ambitious.”

“Unless one overreaches oneself, and then the world laughs at one’s foolish aspirations. I am sensitive to ridicule, I fancy, though I try to cultivate indifference. Well, at any rate we are comrades in ambition.”

Frederica smiled, and glowed with a soft sweet

satisfaction. Bernard's conversation seemed to lift her into a different sphere. The shabby-genteel drawing-room, with its odour of turpentine and pepper, its curtains that had come from the Marquis of Olney's, its second-hand mirrors and wax-flowers; the domestic shifts, the visiting life, and Lady Susan Starkie—all vanished in his presence from her immediate circle of interests. All that was prosaic and sordid in her work and her life, seemed, through his unconscious agency, to melt into a misty neutrality. But when he had departed the influence went too, and the magician's wand lost almost all its potency. It was as though she had been suddenly brought back to her normal condition, when Aunt Theodosia, while carefully pinning the covers again on her chairs, remarked: "Mr. Comyn reminds me of my father—your grandfather yonder, my love—but that portrait does not do him justice. There is the same high-bred, easy way that is a sure sign of birth, but not the polish, or the presence, my dear. To that Mr. Comyn can never attain. There never was such a finished gentleman as your grandfather."

It had often puzzled Frederica's childish understanding, at what stage of social or mental development a lady or gentleman might be considered "finished."

CHAPTER VIII.

MUSIC IN THE DRAWING-ROOM AT BARWOLD.

THERE was quite a large party assembled at Barwold during the latter end of November. Bernard had come down, and was shooting in company with the neighbours, or the stray man or two from London who had been glad to accept an invitation to share in moderate sport. Mr. Lydyiard paid a short visit, and departed, pressed by Sir Emilius to propose himself as a guest later on, and fairly well satisfied with what he saw of Esther's establishment among her relatives. There was no doubt that Sir Emilius, in his negative way, was fond of her, and that she herself was happy; and, as for Lady Isherwood, she was one of those irritating but minor sores of existence which are not much taken into account. The neighbours seemed to regard Esther favourably, and there was evidently no disposition to rake up stories of her father's antecedents or her parentage. This was, in truth, what Lydyiard

had secretly dreaded. But he had little to fear. Twenty years makes a large hole in the existing representatives of county families; and Robert Isherwood had in his youth been so little at home, that there were very few who remembered him, or had any but the vaguest notion of his fate. It was supposed that he had gone out to Australia as many a younger son has done, and Sir Emilius' adoption of his only child left it to be presumed, that the floating stories of disgrace in connection with him were without adequate foundation.

Frederica Talmadge was at Barwold, winning golden opinions from Sir Emilius. He always found in her an appreciative listener and admirer of his paintings and *bric-à-brac*, and had had no hesitation in confiding to her the illustration of his Family Chronicle. He rigged up a temporary studio for her use, and she worked hard for four hours each day, steadily refusing to be diverted from her labour by invitations to walk with the shooters, or to drive with Lady Isherwood, who had taken a great fancy to the young girl.

But though Frederica's mornings were occupied, as soon as the light waned she was her own mistress, and the days are short in November and December. It was usual for the shooters, or those who had found amusement out of doors,

to return early. Occasionally a neighbouring Squire, or the Master of the Fox Hounds himself, would drop in on the way home from the run, the red coat making a bright spot in the pretty, genre picture. The drawing-room, with its antique fireplace and blazing logs, the harmonious contrast of the quaint China, the crimson walls and old Worcester tea-set, and the more or less picturesque appearance of its occupants, was an attractive spot. Bernard and Frederica took to playing duets in the long winter evenings. Lady Isherwood remarked that it was quite a comfort to see Bernard so sociable, he usually hung over the fire in the smoking-room with his book. She thought Germany had improved his manners, etc. She herself plied her crewel-needles, and Esther would sit dreamily in a corner opposite the piano with her book—just lifting her eyes every now and then to catch Bernard's fixed upon her face, as, with his head thrown back, he strummed some spirited German march, or helped Frederica to interpret a crabbed sonata.

Those were very happy days for the three young people, though it is doubtful whether any one of them would have been able, or willing, to assign a definite reason for feeling happy. Frederica, whose sweetest dreams, apart

from that misty romance that hung round her associations with Bernard, had been of artistic proficiency and moderate, middle-class comfort, now found herself lapped, as it were, in Art and luxury, and tasting to the full the pleasures of congenial companionship and surroundings, and dainty living. After her days of labour at the South Kensington School of Art, her meagre fare, and her evenings spent in needlework, and in the scheming of thrift, and patient listening to Miss Talmadge's reminiscences of the higher spheres, or complaints against the maid-of-all-work:—this delicate dining—the atmosphere of ease that pervaded the establishment, the taking things for granted, and the absence of all the daily rubs that made life at Magenta Terrace unlovely—above all, the artistic and musical intercourse with her host and with Bernard—all this was very sweet to Frederica. She had a physical delight in beauty and comfort, and an appreciation of nicety of living, of good attendance and order, that was highly woman-like. She was almost ashamed of the satisfaction it gave her to behold herself in the cheval-glass becomingly dressed for dinner, and of the pleasure she found in Lady Isherwood's jewels and rustling silks and rich velvets. Though Bernard credited her, and not unfairly, with loftier aspir-

ations than the generality of womankind, Frederica was not a whit higher than the most frivolous of her sisters in her genuine love for pretty dresses and dainty finery. Her pleasure in the making of a becoming bonnet was very nearly as great as her satisfaction in painting an artistic fan. Her slender fingers delighted in employment, and her compact brain was ever occupied with concrete realities that gave a definite motive to every act of her existence. She was never visionary, and whatever her aims might be they were clearly defined. Though she loved painting, and meant to make a modest name, and to have a studio, and to be independent and perhaps luxurious, her appreciation of Art never reached enthusiasm. The same with her music. An innate sense of correctness and the fitness of things, an unflagging perseverance in striving up to the highest standard of excellence revealed to her, brought her sometimes close to inspiration, but could not make her reach it.

"You ought to be very happy here, Esther," said Frederica, with just the faintest tinge of envy in her voice, upon the first night of her stay at Barwold.

"Yes, dear," replied Esther. "I am very happy."

“It must be a great change for you, after the sort of life you have described yourself leading on the island. What a lovely house this is, and how nice they all are! Lady Isherwood seems the only discordant element, but one can’t help liking her after a fashion. I should enjoy making a study of her, in a velvet dress, with pearls on her neck, as she sits placidly in one of those large arm-chairs after dinner, when she is looking good-tempered. The solid comfort here must be pleasant to you, Esther.”

“Yes, dear,” said Esther. “It is very pleasant, and I think that I enjoy it, but solid comfort is not the only thing one wants.”

“You are an odd girl! I am never sure, dearly as I love you, how far I understand you. You always seem to be looking wistfully for something, as though you were not quite satisfied.”

After a short pause, Frederica added abruptly:

“Is Ber—Mr. Comyn, often here?”

“You forget that I have been here such a short time, and the house was shut up while the Isherwoods were abroad.”

“True—I forgot. He seems very fond of you.”

Frederica looked at Esther with half-inquiry. Esther coloured deeply. Both the girls were on the point of self-revelation.

“Do you think so?” said Esther, hurriedly. “But it is you whom he admires; I have heard him say so. I am sure there is no one, no girl, Bernard thinks of so highly as he does of you.”

“Really?” asked Frederica, her eyes glistening.

“I am quite certain of it,” Esther sighed as she spoke. “But it is not surprising. Who could help admiring and loving you? Dear Frederica, shall I ever forget how good you were to me when I was at school lonely and uncared for?”

“Nonsense,” said Frederica, blushing, and looking pleased. “What did I ever do for you?—and now that you are no longer lonely and uncared for, you are good to me. Don’t you see? It makes it all even.”

“Nothing that costs so little could make it even,” replied Esther.

Esther was right in saying that Bernard thought highly of Frederica. Every day that he spent in her society he admired her more, telling himself sometimes that if a man were seeking a wife, this was the sort of woman—modest, refined, intellectual, almost beautiful, and capable of devotion, yet not above the ordinary cares of womanhood, with whom he would have the most certain chance of happiness. He talked to

Frederica far more than he did to Esther, hanging over her easel, discussing the technicalities of her profession in an eager, interested manner; arguing with and instructing her; and pulling down books from the library shelves to point out deficiencies in her education, while the unconventional freedom of his manner implied to her a personal interest that she was quite justified in taking for granted. Whatever vague jealousy of Esther there might have been in her mind vanished now. Bernard would sit over the piano with her for hours. Music seemed to create a mutual dependence and understanding between them. When she played to him he listened silently, but a disinterested spectator would have observed with curiosity how often in the dusk, when Frederica's lissome fingers distilled mild, suggestive harmony from the Broadwood, Bernard would quietly cross over and seat himself beside Esther, and how more often his eyes would be fixed upon her face than upon that of Frederica.

And through it all Esther was at first doubtfully, then deeply, conscious of a tacit bond of sympathy linking her and Bernard together. She knew that one of those long, mute looks towards herself, meant more than a thousand glib words addressed to Frederica. If he did not

talk much to her in company, it was not, she felt certain, because he had no impulse towards her ; on the contrary, his eyes appealed to her a dozen times in the hour, and this, after all, though to outsiders a deceptive, is yet an effectual, mode of intercourse. As for herself, she felt that a lingering pressure of Bernard's fingers made the night sweet to her. His unobtrusive homage touched her more than words, and she was constantly on the watch, wittingly and involuntarily, for those intangible marks of understanding which are only translatable by those whose hearts are in unison.

The consciousness of Bernard's presence, of Bernard's approval or disapproval, was with her at all times, no matter how her brain or fingers might be employed. It had come to be so with her, that she knew Bernard's opinion almost before it was uttered, and that during the day when he was absent, shooting or hunting, she seemed to live only for the evening when he would be near her.

And yet she never thought of connecting this joy in his presence and in his affection, for she knew that he cared for her, with what she had felt in her early girlhood for George Brand. The two phases of being were entirely irreconcilable. She had never framed seriously to herself the proposition that Bernard might wish to marry

her, or that she might be willing to become his wife. Love and marriage were not of what she was thinking. She had loved George, and had given her young heart and her maiden lips to him, perhaps too freely, and certainly ignorantly; but she had felt a joy in yielding them, and she fancied that to no other man could she ever belong so again. She tingled with modest shame at the thought of George's passionate caresses. With the recollection of that early love episode there came always an involuntary recoiling from her old self. She could not imagine the being she knew now, to have ever been that childish, craving, and unknowing Esther.

George had no part in her existence under its present conditions. He was of the past, which had still the faint glamour of intoxication, but which carried with it also a flavour of shame.

The winter was a pleasant one, as winters go. The pheasants were more numerous than had been anticipated, and the frosts were infrequent; therefore, though the would-be skaters grumbled, the gentlemen who hunted on the other side of the county rejoiced.

There had been shooting luncheons, Lady Isherwood had given two or three dinner-parties, and there were rumours, later on, of several balls in the neighbourhood. Bernard, with the excep-

tion of occasional runs up to London, seemed to have taken up his quarters at Barwold, and to have forgotten all about his projected work, while Frederica had painted the much-desired fan to match the cardinal dress trimmed with pink bigonias, and had become the object of one of Lady Isherwood's uncertain attachments.

One afternoon, when the young people were lounging in the hall over five o'clock tea, Miss Lina Welby appeared.

"How happy you look here!" she said, in her easy enthusiastic gabble, with its little emphases here and there. "This dear old hall is too awfully enchanting. It is quite comforting to come in and see it with its funny, old oak book-cases and wood-fires. Sir Emilius has such taste, but he bores me a little sometimes with his talk about China, and old prints, and spinets, and Queen Elizabeth, and the influence of Art. It's all very nice, and mother goes in for it, but one in a family is quite enough. You must know mother better," continued Miss Welby. She accepted the tea Bernard handed her, and seating herself in an arm-chair before the fire, went on addressing herself chiefly to Esther:

"She is such a darling in her way, and so amusing. She is the salvation of our ramshackly family. I don't know what would become of us

without her. She is like the Decalogue hung up at the back of the Communion Table, you know, with 'Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt do no murder. Thou shalt not bear false witness,' legibly written upon her face; and that reminds me that I brought a note from mother to Lady Isherwood, asking you all to dinner next week. It will be *too* delightful if you can come."

Esther explained that both Lady Isherwood and Sir Emilius were out driving.

"How are the old women at Allerton, Miss Welby?" asked Bernard.

"They are very shivery, Mr. Comyn, and require quantities of stimulation and parochial comfort in the shape of ginger-wine, and snuff, and hymns. You won't give me any credit for my ministrations, and the roads are so muddy that I am really obliged to clump about in pattens."

Frederica, who was drawing, looked up shyly, and remarked that it had been a very wet winter.

"It has been too awfully depressing," said Miss Welby, giving her trim, bird-like head a little twist which was peculiar to her. "We went to Brighton last month, but it was rather a case of putting claret into a sherry-bottle, and serving it out with the soup, don't you know?—for all

Woodfordshire was there. Since we came home, we have had an archæologist and an American girl at Allerton; you'll meet them when you dine, and it is rather fun to watch them spooning one another. I have some delightful schemes in my head, Miss Isherwood; I hope Miss Talmadge will bring some music with her when you come. We have got a cousin with us, who came yesterday. He has just sold out of the army; he has been quartered in Ireland, and he *is* such a dear. He has been telling me all kinds of amusing stories about the way the Kilkenny girls made love to him. You can't think what a comforting boy he is. When mother is particularly dank and ecclesiastical, and father more than usually edgy about the foxes, he stirs them up, and there is a fizz which is always exciting."

It was growing dark, and Bernard threw down one of Frederica's chinks that he had been sharpening. "Let us come into the drawing-room and have some music. Miss Welby, I am sure that you sing."

"Oh, yes, I sing," cried Lina, throwing off her seal-skin jacket; "that is to say, I croak English ballads and squeak Italian ditties. I can do everything, Mr. Comyn, after a fashion. I can write French poetry, and translate German, and paint pink and purple landscapes, and play

the piano in the style of the English miss educated upon the Continent. Would you like to hear me?"

She ran into the drawing-room, and, seating herself at the piano, trilled a French comic song which sounded piquant enough from her rosy lips. The room was picturesquely dim, but the last rays of a red setting sun entered through the casement window, and shed a glory over the fair head of Frederica as she stooped over the sorting of a bundle of music.

The piano was placed in an angle of the same window, turned sideways towards the fireplace with its antique logs and flickering wood fire. The recess was very deep, and there was in it a low seat half-shrouded by the curtains. A spindle-legged table stood beside the piano, and upon it was a bowl of *pot-pourri*, and a tall vase filled with brown and crimson leaves. Upon the wall opposite the piano hung a quaint mirror, surrounded by an arrangement of China plates and vases upon dead gold brackets. The mirror reflected the light from the fireplace, and sent it dancing back on to the China upon the walls and the brass mountings of the cabinets. The sun sank slowly behind a group of naked elms, and the stars began to twinkle in a blue frosty sky. Lina went on singing snatches by heart,

and presently Parkins brought in a mellow, shaded lamp, which he placed upon the piano ; but he did not draw the curtains, so that there was still that fascinating mixture of daylight, lamplight, and flamelight.

"Now the light has come in," exclaimed Lina, rising, "and it is your turn, Miss Talmadge."

"Let us try those quartettes of Schumann's," said Bernard. He and Frederica seated themselves at the piano, and there was a gentle vibration as of stringed instruments, and a rippling staccato movement, which swelled louder, and hurried into a crisp crashing presto. Esther and Lina were sitting near the fire. Wallenstein stretched himself luxuriously upon his mat, and the Persian cat crept from beneath the *portière*, and took up her position at Esther's feet. "How comforting it is to see a cat licking its paws!" said Miss Welby reflectively regarding the animal. "I think that I was once a tiny kitty that never grew any bigger. I am so small, am I not? Oh, those heavenly violins! Do you remember that fusty old St. James's Hall, with the long row of men in black coats, like mutes at a funeral, and that delicious Norman Neruda? This puts me in mind of it, and then the delightful din outside, and those dear hansom cabs. Oh, I love London so dread-

fully ! How comforting it is to be reminded of what one loves ! ”

“ Oh, please don’t talk,” said Esther, breathlessly.

Bernard seemed in an inspired mood. Music was with him always a powerful, emotional agent. Every now and then he looked across at Esther, and his eyes conveyed mutely the same passionate harmony which was breathed by the instrument on which he played. Frederica, too, was borne upwards by his enthusiasm into higher regions than any to which she had ever attained. It was to her heart that the refrain was speaking. It seemed to have a message for her only. Her frame thrilled with the accidental contact of Bernard’s fingers. This was the true joy of Art—the joy of being brought into intimate association with the inner life of the being best loved. The delight of her painting was sullied by the sordid pressure of poverty, but this inspiration belonged only to Bernard. He was raising her to himself. The measure changed into a rhythmic, yet emotional, march, and then ceased. Bernard rose from the piano, and Frederica’s hands dropped into her lap. She was thrilling with an excitement which no mere perfection of execution or combination of harmonies could have roused in her. She hardly

heard what was being said, and when a duet was proposed between herself and Miss Welby, had no will to object. Bernard and Lina changed places, and the girls' voices blended together in an English ballad. Frederica kept her place at the piano, and Lina stood up against the background of window and dim landscape. Bernard and Esther stood at opposite corners of the fireplace. Impelled by involuntary sympathy, they turned towards each other. Esther's glance was self-betraying, and Bernard's was full of the warm passion that the music had sent coursing through his frame. It brought to Esther the sudden, deep conviction that he loved her, as George had loved her upon the island, and uprooted in a moment the calm sophistry which had defined their relations as fraternal. She felt as though her soul had leaped out from controlling bonds, and had joined itself to his. Her face became intensified with a new beauty. The voices of the two girls seemed to be quiring afar in a strain of angelic harmony. Esther and Bernard forgot where they were in the joy of mutual revelation. It was as though an unseen presence sanctified their emotions, and as if, in that higher life which, under exceptional circumstances, seems possible to every finely strung man and woman, their two natures must

be drawn towards each other, and cling together through all time. They approached each other, and their hands sought each other, and clasped in unspoken understanding. Nothing was said—there was no need for speech; the look which passed between them told the secrets of the two hearts.

The music ceased abruptly for a moment, and Frederica's voice broke. "Good gracious!" exclaimed Lina; "have you lost your place? What is the matter?"

Esther and Bernard started asunder. They did not know, nor did Lina, that the old-fashioned mirror facing the pianoforte had, as Frederica looked vaguely into its depths, reflected the scene by the fireplace, and given back the mutual drawing together and betraying gaze and hand-clasp.

Something seemed to rise in Frederica's throat, and choke the words she was singing. She faltered, and almost broke down, but at Lina Welby's exclamation controlled herself, and went on, with just a little jarring in some of the notes, till the song was finished.

"Thank you," said Bernard, moving towards the piano; "that was very charming, and it was going so well; but you have not sung together quite often enough to bring your voices into perfect accord."

"We must try it again before very long," said Lina. "I thought it very nice, all except that one false note; and if Miss Talmadge had not stopped so suddenly no one would have noticed it; but I must be going now. Mr. Comyn, would you mind ordering my pony carriage? I am so sorry not to have seen Lady Isherwood, but you will be sure to tell her how much darling mother looks forward to seeing her next Wednesday. You'll all come, you nice people, and we'll have some more music."

The carriage came round, and Miss Welby departed. Almost immediately afterwards Sir Emilius and Lady Isherwood returned. They had been making a call at a great house in the neighbourhood famous for its pictures and China.

"A most interesting visit," said Sir Emilius in his piping voice. "Lord Atherton quite realizes my idea of a high-priest of Art. A congenial spirit, my dear; a rare thing to find. He is coming over very soon to see my spinet. He had a Straduarius, a gem, which I could not help coveting. I must take you to see his collection, my dear," he added, turning kindly to Frederica. "It would interest you greatly."

Frederica's heart was swelling too high to allow her thanks to be audible.

"Lady Atherton is a perfect dowdy," said

Lady Isherwood, "and the tea was abominable. I must have some more. Esther, ring the bell for fresh muffins. It was extremely inconsiderate of you not to have them ready."

She took up the note Miss Welby had left, and began to explain its contents in a loud voice to Sir Emilius, while Esther and Frederica took advantage of the diversion to escape up-stairs, each seeking the solitude of her own bed-room in order to review what had befallen her. Esther sat down in an arm-chair by the newly-lighted fire, trembling with a half-guilty joy at the assurance of Bernard's love, which the evening had brought her. No woman, whatever may be the circumstances of her lot, can help feeling a secret delight in the knowledge that she is loved by the man to whom she has consciously or unconsciously given her heart. In the first swift rush of her emotion, Esther was not shy of telling herself that she loved Bernard. She even repeated, with a sort of defiant satisfaction, "I am his—his altogether—and he is mine." But the element of defiance brought with it one of analysis, and following upon the first glow of happiness came a flood of shame at the recollection of other love-looks, other caresses, fraught at the time with a more material intoxication, from which the maidenly purity that prescribes

fidelity to the one, as the first article in the creed of love, revolted now with a sense of humiliation. It was borne in upon her as she sat in the half-darkness of her bed-chamber, perplexed, wincing with girlish sensibility at the thoughts and recollections that came crowding to her mind, yet strangely excited and happy, that there was another even greater barrier between herself and Bernard than that of actual or fancied disloyalty. It was the barrier which he himself had by his own confession of opinions raised. His words, as they had stood together upon the bridge, two months ago, seemed burned into her soul. She remembered them every one, and the tone in which he had uttered them. He had told her that he held the man morally guilty who took for a wife the heritress of disgrace. Judged by his own speech, he would be a traitor to his code of duty if, knowing her father's history, he then proposed to marry her. No!—he would be consistent and would give her up. She had a woman's pride in this reflection, and, by all the laws of heroism, she was bound to spare him such another ordeal as that through which he had passed, when he had sacrificed his affection for the young American, in obedience to his principles.

Esther did not understand Bernard's creed of

obligation to the race—which indeed, brought under the pressure of passion, would have been far more difficult of enforcement; and, under present conditions, it is questionable to what extent his principles of eight years before might have undergone modification. It was not natural that a girl of nineteen should enter into such questions of abstract morality. Esther had read of possible physiological or psychological objections to unions which might otherwise have been suitable and happy; but she had classed these facts and theories with those indefinite considerations which existed, but which were never likely to entrench upon her individual experience, much as a Laplander might regard the classification of laws relating to the phenomena of earthquakes and cyclones—interesting data to a dweller in volcanic regions, but positively unimportant to himself.

But now that the consideration was brought fairly home to her, she, girl-like, magnified its weight in the scale of argument. An obstacle of sentiment frequently appears to a woman more difficult to surmount than one of fact, and the less able she is to reason upon the impediment, the more insuperable it seems to her.

The dressing-gong sounded while Esther was still sitting over her fire, and she got up and

walked two or three times the length of the room as a vent for her agitation. Anne, the housemaid who had been told off to wait upon her, entered with her dress, which she had been ironing, and proceeded to lay out her clothes. Esther threw herself into the business of her toilette with a feverish anxiety to escape from her thoughts. While Anne was putting a few finishing touches to her boddice, she remembered a bunch of flowers which she had gathered in the conservatory and had left in Frederica's room, intending to divide it with her friend, and stepped now across the corridor to fetch her share. The two girls occupied chambers close to each other. They had so often shared the same, and had been accustomed to pass in and out of each other's rooms without ceremony, that when Esther's tap received no answer she turned the handle and softly entered. Everything was in darkness, and it was not for a moment, not till she had heard an agonized voice, breathing in a wild sob the words, "Oh, Bernard! Bernard!" that Esther became aware of Frederica's presence. The exclamation was uttered several times, but so low, and in such gasps, that only Esther's quickened ears could have distinguished the name.

Frederica was huddled up on the sofa at the foot of her bed, her face buried in the cushions,

her frame shaken at intervals by deep-drawn, quivering sobs. The opening of the door sent a streak of light from the passage into the dim room. Frederica started. "Who's there?" she exclaimed. "Put my hot water down, please." Then she lifted her head sharply, and saw Esther standing in the doorway. She buried it again with an impatient cry—"Oh, go away; can't you leave me alone?" that was quite unlike the composed, gentle Frederica of ordinary life.

Esther stood still, bewildered by the suddenness of the revelation that had been forced upon her, and that seemed to numb for a moment her own pain. Then she turned and left the room, closing the door after her. She paused for a moment in the corridor, while she lifted her hands to her head as though to shut out the sound of Frederica's sobbing. "Oh! how can I bear it? What can I do?" she said wildly to herself, scarcely realizing that it was not of Frederica's anguish she was thinking, but of her own intolerable suffering.

She dressed in a determined hurry, as though she would not give herself time for thought; and when she had finished, walked up and down her room till the gong sounded for dinner. Anne lingered to speak to her about the Christmas decorations, and she was surprised to find herself

entering briskly into the subject. At the last moment, when she had reached the head of the stairs, she turned back for another pair of gloves, because those which Anne had given her were soiled.

Frederica passed her upon the landing. Usually, when they so met, the two girls linked arms and interchanged comments upon their respective toilettes, but to-night Frederica hurried by, muttering that she was late, and entered the drawing-room before her friend. She was very pale; her eyes looked red, and her lips were quivering. Bernard noticed the change in her appearance, and inquired with a cruel solicitude whether she had a headache. But she only shook her head, and Bernard remarked quietly that he thought Miss Welby had been a little overpowering.

The evening was altogether dank and uncomfortable. Frederica tried, at Bernard's request, to play as usual, but made a lamentable failure; and Esther sat apart, over a frock she was making for a child in the village, and studiously avoided meeting Bernard's eye.

The two girls made an early move for bed, and as Bernard handed them their candles, he detained Esther for a moment in the hall, while Frederica passed on up-stairs.

"I am obliged to go to London to-morrow," he said, in an eager, excited voice, which did not resemble Bernard's usual utterance. "I would not go unless it were absolutely necessary, but I shall return on Wednesday."

"We are to dine at Allerton on Wednesday evening," said Esther, looking down at her candle.

"Can I do anything for you in London?"

"No, thank you; nothing."

"I shall start by the early train to-morrow, and so shall not see you before I leave." Bernard's tone was almost pleading. "Esther, say good-bye to me now."

She held out her hand without looking at his face. "Good-bye, Bernard."

"Why are you so cold? Why won't you look at me?" exclaimed Bernard, passionately. 'Esther, I want to speak; but surely there is no need to tell you what I feel. After this afternoon we must both know—" The drawing-room door opened and Sir Emilius came out, peering through his spectacles for his candle. Bernard dropped Esther's hand. "Good night," he said, abruptly.

Esther ran up-stairs to her own room, and locked the door. She walked to and fro in a secret agitation, her hands clasped above her

head. "I can't! I can't!" she kept saying half-aloud. "I do love him. I must love him. It cannot be wrong." A conscious smile played about her lips and made them more soft and womanly, and she blushed rosily at the remembrance of Bernard's passionate exclamation — "After this afternoon we must both know" — Yes, she knew. . . . Another moment and she could not have refrained from lifting her face up to his, and then concealment would have been impossible. . . .

A second later, and Frederica's pale face shut out Bernard's ardent eyes, and the sound of her gasping sobs seemed to drown Bernard's half-uttered declaration. Esther could not smilingly contemplate her own joy, knowing that it involved the misery of her friend. To rejoice in happiness at the cost of another's woe was hateful to her, and when that other was her friend, to whom she was linked by ties ten thousand times stronger than the mere school-girl attachments which are formed and broken by the dozen — it seemed impossible. Esther's deep, enthusiastic nature had sanctified the bond between herself and Frederica into a sacred obligation on her own part. She thought of what Frederica's affection had seemed to her when she had been longing and praying for love, and magnified it into

something greater than it had really been. She thought of Frederica's tender sympathy, of the many kindnesses she had received at her hands, of the happy days she had spent beneath Miss Talmadge's roof. She remembered how she had sobbed out her grief at George's desertion upon Frederica's bosom. She thought, too, of the vow she had half-unconsciously taken upon herself then, of the echo of her words through the dim chamber, and of how they had seemed to return to her again after she had uttered them, invested with a solemn meaning. . . .

"I will be true ; I will try to be true," sobbed Esther, when after some hours of mental struggling she laid her head upon the pillow.

In the morning she was awakened by the rumble of the dog-cart wheels as they bore Bernard to the station.

CHAPTER IX.

“MY COUSIN, CAPTAIN BRAND.”

BERNARD'S departure took place on Saturday. All that morning Frederica drew diligently in her studio under Sir Emilius' supervision; in the afternoon she drove with Lady Isherwood, and in the evening the Rector of the parish and his wife dined at Barwold Court.

There was no opportunity for confidence between the girls during the day, and at night, instead of accompanying Esther to her room for half-an-hour's chat, as was usually the case, Frederica, looking miserable and impenetrable, turned away at the door, and passed into her own chamber, locking herself in determinedly; so that though Esther bleeding inwardly, pictured her friend sobbing wretchedly upon her pillow, but could not venture to comfort her.

“To be wrath with one we love” is almost the severest phase of mental suffering; but I think that Esther suffered more keenly during

the estrangement than her friend. Frederica's cold avoidance of her society pained the girl more deeply than the bitterest spoken reproaches. She did not know of that reflected look and handclasp which had betrayed so much, and was at first at a loss to account for the change in Frederica's manner; but she explained it to herself by the supposition that Frederica resented her intrusion the previous evening, and that her pride was wounded at having unconsciously revealed her secret.

On Sunday the two girls accompanied the elders to Church, but not a word was said either going or returning which had any private, personal bearing. A dreary luncheon followed, enlivened by a series of bald commonplaces; then the usual parish ministrations in the village. Frederica had usually gone with Esther to carry a dinner or read to an old woman, but to-day she declined to assist. Esther returned alone, feeling that she must at all costs break this wretched barrier of reserve that debarred her from the communion most precious to her now. She determined to speak to Frederica, even if it were necessary to say her whole mind, and to tell her that for her sake Bernard's love was renounced.

Sir Emilius and Lady Isherwood were both dozing over the fire in the hall, but Frederica

was not to be seen. Esther sought her in her bedroom and studio, and in the morning-room, and at last found her in the deserted library, seated in a low window-seat, a portfolio of sketches in her lap, and her face stony and miserable, turned towards the wintry garden without.

Except by Sir Emilius and Bernard this room was seldom used, and upon this afternoon Frederica had thought herself secure of solitude. She looked up with a resentful surprise as Esther entered. "I thought that you were in the village," she said, making an effort to speak in her usual manner.

"I have been, and have come back," said Esther. "I looked for you everywhere, but could not find you, so I thought that I would try here; I wanted to talk to you, dear Frederica. We don't seem to have had a word together for the last two days."

"We were both busy yesterday," said Frederica, with a jarring laugh.

"No," answered Esther; "I don't think we kept apart because of that."

She was yearning to throw herself into the tide of Frederica's feelings, to identify herself with her friend's pain, and to break, at whatever cost of suffering to herself, this unnatural, hollow

reserve. All her heart was in her eyes as she seated herself on the window-seat beside her friend.

Frederica evaded the suggestion which the words conveyed.

"I am looking over the sketches I have made," she said, coldly, without directly meeting Esther's gaze, "to see how far I've got on, and what I must still work at here. I have been a long time at Barwold, and I am afraid that Aunt Theodosia is lonely without me. I think that I ought to go home."

Esther put out her hands and touched those of Frederica, looking at her earnestly with a fresh sympathy made all the keener by the consciousness of her own pain; but Frederica's face was turned towards the window.

"It is not that," began Esther, in tremulous accents. "I know it is not that. You want to go away because something has made you unhappy—because you want to escape; because—(her voice broke)—I can't make you understand what I feel. There are some things which it is difficult to say. If people could but look into our hearts they would see that we were full of longing and love, only that we were afraid to speak for fear of wounding." . . . Poor Esther was trying to convey her own deep regret for

having unconsciously forced the sanctuary of Frederica's feelings. If she could show her sympathy without betraying her own suffering—but her meaning came from her lips brokenly. "I know," Esther went on, seeing that Frederica's lips quivered, though her face was still set and averted, "how hard it is to tell even oneself that one—loves ; and how doubly hard to know that another person outside ourselves has seen, has heard, what we thought was hidden deep down in our own hearts, so that we have scarcely dared to put it into words. I know—I have felt—I have loved—"

In the presence of Frederica's bruised pride Esther could not say, "I love."

"You have discovered my secret," said Frederica, in a cold, distant tone, and without turning her head. "I cannot bear to think of it ; I am ashamed ; I am humiliated by knowing that you know what I feel ; but you have taught me that women can forget easily. This is the first time that I have cared, and perhaps I can forget too, like others."

The repressed bitterness, the accusing ring of Frederica's words, struck so deep home to Esther's heart, that she did not for the moment feel that they were ungenerously uttered.

"You mean," she said, in a very low voice,

“that I have forgotten ; but you are wrong. My misery keeps me from forgetting. If I could forget I should be false too.”

Frederica turned at Esther's words, a fresh thought softening her bitterness.

“You are unhappy like me ?” she asked.

“Yes,” answered Esther ; “I am—I have been very unhappy.”

Esther was thinking of Bernard—of her conflict and renunciation—but Frederica did not fathom her companion's mind, and fancied that she was alluding to George Brand and her early disappointment. George Brand had scarcely been mentioned between them since the night of Esther's confession ; but till the previous evening Frederica had believed firmly that Esther still loved him. Was it possible that she had been mistaken ? Could she disbelieve the evidence of the mirror ? A tender impulse, unalloyed for the moment by any jealousy, prompted her to kiss Esther's lips that were near her own face.

“Forgive me,” she murmured. “I have been so miserable ; it made me so hard. I thought you were happy, and that your joy was my pain. I am glad that it was not so. Was it so ?” she asked eagerly. “You know what I mean.”

Esther hesitated for a moment.

"No," she said at length. "It could not be so. I could never have any joy that was pain to you."

Frederica kissed her again, and the two clasped each other and silently mingled their tears for a minute.

"I know," whispered Esther, her own heart seeming to speak out of its anguish to that of Frederica. "There is no pain so hard, nothing hurts us so much, as to think one we love false or untrue."

"He will come back to you," said Frederica, still imagining that Esther was referring to Brand, but Esther said nothing to undeceive her. "He cared for you," went on Frederica. "You were not humiliated by learning that you had been mistaken, and that he had never wanted your love. I could not help it," she added, as if in extenuation of herself; "I don't think that I am vain, but he has always been apart in my mind from other men, from the very first day that I saw him in Westminster Abbey and drew his face. It was like a fate that we should be thrown together afterwards. He was always so kind, and seemed to care—but I was self-deceived."

"Bernard is fond of you," said Esther with an effort. "I have heard him say so. I have heard

him say that you were a woman with whom a man could be happy."

"But I saw him turn to you, and take your hand," exclaimed Frederica, eager and longing that her words might be contradicted. "I saw it in the mirror above the piano, when Miss Welby and I were singing. He never looked at me as he looked at you then. It is you for whom he cares."

Esther turned very pale. "He cares for me," she said almost inaudibly as though the words were forced from her. "Yes, I know that he does. He is so kind that he must care for those who are lonely and dependent. I was lonely and dependent when he first knew me. But it is not as you think. He would not marry me; there is a reason why he would not."

Frederica looked earnestly and questioningly into Esther's face. "Is it true, Esther?" she asked doubtfully.

"It is not as you fancy," repeated Esther. "He would not wish to marry me—if he knew—and I am not so light of love as you thought. I will be true," she added earnestly.

Frederica asked no further question. She sat silent, but her face softened from its former hard, resentful look. Esther left the window-seat and walked to the other end of the room, where she

stood for several moments before one of the book-cases. There was in her a kind of exaltation which arose from the consciousness of having strained after what she believed to be right. The sacrifice was scarcely voluntary, but she would not have been human had not the feeling which follows upon renunciation been in her breast. She returned and kissed Frederica's forehead. "You are not angry with me now for knowing. You will love me again."

"Oh, Esther!" exclaimed Frederica warmly. "I don't deserve that you should care for me as you do—I have always said so. How could I help loving you? It is myself that I hate."

* * * * *

Bernard returned on Wednesday as he had promised, but he did not arrive from the station till quite late, when the rest of the party were dressing for the Allerton dinner. Esther and he shook hands silently out of the carriage-window.

"How tiresome you are, Bernard!" said Lady Isherwood. "You should have telegraphed to let us know for certain that you were coming. How did you get here from the station?"

"I walked Hermione."

"Of course five people cannot squeeze into the carriage. You must sit on the box, and

Alfred must stay at home. It is a fine night; I daresay you won't mind opening the gates."

Allerton Hall—a large square-built house, modernized, in doubtful taste, by a flat front on to an Elizabethan back—gave out a flood of light and warmth as the door of the softly-carpeted decorated hall was opened to admit the Isherwood party. Lady Isherwood, gorgeous in the famous cardinal satin, shook out her ample plumage. Frederica looked graceful and lady-like in her black dress and bunches of stephanotis; and Esther, with her small face and deep eyes framed in dark hair, more than ever like a Sir Joshua picture, in a white gown, with passion-flowers in her bosom.

The drawing-room seemed full of people when they entered. Beyond it, was a conservatory lighted with coloured lamps and festooned with a flowering creeper; and Lina Welby in maize tarletan, with three or four black satellites round her, flitted in and out among the shrubs and ferns. Mrs. Welby looking like an harmonious picture, in black velvet, and wearing a diamond cross upon her shapely neck, received her guests. Beside her sat an over-dressed, yellow, old lady, the mother of a pretty American girl, who, befringed and attractive with that delicate, slightly got up beauty that is noticeable in young

American women, was talking through her nose to a dried-up archæologist with an eye-glass, who leaned over her chair. Several other young ladies in billowy garments, and gentlemen of the country-house type, clustered about the small tables, and looked at the photographic albums. The rest of the company was composed of local magnates, of whom the ladies wore old-fashioned dresses and family diamonds, and talked about their parishes, their children, and their governesses; while their lords conversed upon hunting, the price of oats—an interesting subject to the M. F. H. and the proprietors of large studs—or the last Conservative meeting at Woodchester, and the blunders of their county member. The Allerton parties were usually popular, and people talked of it as a pleasant house where there was no stiffness, and where "the county" was brought together.

Miss Welby rushed forward to greet Esther. "You nice person—how dear of you to come—you look so lovely to-night, so unlike other people. I have had such a trying day (in a lower tone); two papas with shorthorn interests, and two shy daughters who hibernate from November till May (mentally, I mean), and haven't an idea beyond lawn-tennis during the rest of the year. My dear, if there's anything in the world that

bores me it's neighbours of the feminine gender. I may say that to you, because you are such a comforting creature, and not to be classed in the category of county misses. Isn't it a fearful function to-night? Do come into the conservatory. Doesn't it look pretty lighted up? I am going to introduce my cousin to you. Dear boy! He is to take you into dinner. Mind you make him tell you about the places he has been to, and the Irish young ladies. George, come here."

Esther perceived dimly, behind a flowering myrtle shrub, the outline of a black figure, and the turn of a head that seemed strangely familiar to her. In a moment the gentleman had come forward, and Miss Welby was introducing him. "My cousin, Captain Brand. George, you are to take Miss Isherwood in to dinner; make yourself very agreeable—she likes being amused." And then Lina darted into the drawing-room, leaving Esther standing face to face with her old love.

The recognition was swift. Something like the same rush of feeling that had overpowered Esther at Burlington House swept over her now—the same mingling of sensations, of attraction tinged with repulsion, and annihilation for the moment of her present identity, as their parting rose vividly before her imagination. The grave

upon the shore—the steamer upon the horizon—the last impassioned kisses—the two figures—eager man and drooping girl hurrying along the beach—the wrench of farewell—the boat which bore him from her, dwindling into a speck upon the waves—and then the despair and blank desolation which had fallen upon her after his departure. It was difficult to realize, that she and George were standing now a pace apart, in the very centre of that English civilization which had been as a dream to her—a part of his life.

The meeting was a greater shock to George than to the girl. There had been no intermediate glimpse to keep alive the remembrance, and he had almost forgotten Esther during the time which had passed since they parted. Only a few moments before, he had been saying some soft nothings to Lina, and had told himself that a man might indeed do worse than secure so lively a companion for the rest of his earthly career. Ever since old Lord Coniston had signified his intention of leaving Grately to George there had been a sort of tacit understanding among the Allerton folk, that if at his death the two young people were agreeable, the estates should be joined in their persons. There had been no definite arrangement, nothing to fetter the two

parties concerned, but just sufficient to impart a pleasant *arrière pensée* to their intercourse. Now in the space of a moment, a thousand sensations half-forgotten, but of a pungency never surpassed, came crowding back upon George, and made his cousin's attractions appear insipid and commonplace. Lina was only an English girl who had been brought up in an atmosphere of conventionality, and whose amusing gush became mannerism upon closer intimacy—a girl, too, who would always flirt with him, and whom he thought he might have at any time for the asking; but Esther was the heroine of a beautiful incomplete poem, which had left off at the point of supreme interest, and which natural curiosity made him long to resume. Her image had not troubled his peace or interfered with his pleasure. It had not made his life a whit purer or more noble; but faded though it was in his mind, it was yet encircled with a halo of romantic fervour that set his brief passion for her above all the other ephemeral loves he had known. And there were, too, mingled with the memory of her, associations that chimed in with his luxuriant, pleasure-loving temperament. The thought of her was mixed up with recollections of days of Southern languor and passionate summer—of still, sensuous nights, laden with the scent of jasmine and stephanotis

—of voluptuousness of nature and emotion that had never, under similar combinations, been presented to him since. He saw a subtle conflict of feeling upon her expressive face, and with the impatient desire to turn the tide of her impulses towards him, he stretched his hand out eagerly and touched her arm. "Esther!—Mousie!—who would have dreamed of meeting you here? You have not forgotten me!"

The pet name acted upon Esther's heart much as a vigorous breath acts upon a half-expiring ember, kindling a momentary life and then dying away. She had often imagined this meeting, and had pictured to herself at times a scene in which all the finer elements of melodrama should be mingled. She had seen George in fancy—passionate, pleading, regretful—had fancied herself scornful and seemingly cold, while yet her whole being should be strung to the highest pitch of emotion; but she had not dreamed that she could, by any possibility, be indifferent.

Now, after the first shock, she felt that she could almost speak to him calmly, could even take his hand without any painful agitation. There was something wanting; it was like the half-dead coal. The life seemed to have gone out of her passion. It was like looking at the still face of a late living actor, who had had the power

of stirring to grief, or joy, or mirth ; there was the mask left, but the motive-spring was broken.

“ I could never forget you,” said Esther, in the grave, sweet voice he remembered.

“ And the dear, old days at the island,” continued Brand : “ days that would have been all happiness but for the last cruel one that brought the misery of parting ? ”

“ No,” said Esther again ; and he observed with joy a deep blush spreading like a wave over her face and throat.

“ Darling ! ” he murmured with passion ; and then Esther looked at him, her deep, clear, yet perplexed eyes seeming like those of a child, to ask from him an explanation of the change which had fallen upon her. It was the same voice—no lover had called her “ darling ” since he had done so upon the island—but there was a total absence of those mysterious thrills which such expressions of endearment had once produced. A little of the old glamour lingered about his presence, but it was like the ghost of dead emotion that could never again be a living force.

“ Oh, hush ! ” she exclaimed, in a pained voice ; “ don’t say that—not now.”

“ Why not now ? ” asked Brand, hurried by excited longing into an explanation which he did not reflect might be compromising. “ You

blame me perhaps for not having gone out again to Australia—for not having made an effort to find you in England ; but you don't understand. There were influences to contend against, difficult to resist. There was my uncle—he is dead now, and I am my own master. At that time it was impossible for me to make advances. I should have beggared myself for life. A man has no right to bring misery and poverty upon a woman. In my—my order of society these things are not looked at from a sentimental point of view. I could not know that you were different to what you seemed—that your position had altered. . . ."

"I wrote to you," said Esther, with a pained perplexity in her eyes and voice—"I wrote to you twice before I left Australia; I directed the letters to your bankers as you had told me."

"I never got the letters," cried Brand. "Those infernal dolts. I'll swear the letters never reached me."

"George," said Miss Welby, nodding through the archway. "Don't you see every one going in to dinner?"

CHAPTER X.

THE DINNER PARTY AT ALLERTON.

GEORGE gave Esther his arm, and they followed the procession into the dining-room. Mr. Welby, with Lady Isherwood on his right, was seated at their end of the table. Lina, flanked by the Rector and the archæologist, was opposite. Sir Emilius had taken in Mrs. Welby; and Bernard, with Frederica beside him, had been placed some distance off, and was just visible to Esther through a rift in the foliage-plants that decorated the table. He was bending over Frederica, and she was smiling and blushing brightly. The soup was handed round mid such tentative remarks as usually preface a dinner-party. Private conversation at such close quarters with half a dozen pairs of ears was next to impossible. When their neighbours' tongues had been somewhat unloosed by sherry, George whispered to Esther: "Do you remember our first meal together on the island?"

Esther uttered an almost inaudible "yes."

“And our meeting and walk afterwards? Ah! it seems but yesterday since you and I were sitting together by your mother’s grave. There are some things which strike one’s imagination so vividly that one would think of them if one were dying.”

“Sir Emilius been hunting much this winter?” asked Mr. Welby of Lady Isherwood on George’s left. “I forgot though; he don’t go in for hunting as we do here—antiquities, China, and that sort of thing. More in your line, eh, Farquharson?”

“I like a day with the hounds as well as any one, Mr. Welby,” said Mr. Farquharson, the archæologist. “But talking of foxes, we found a very perfect skeleton the other day among the Roman remains at Puddenhams—a most interesting discovery.”

“A live fox in the Puddenhams spinnies last Saturday would have been a more interesting discovery to me,” said the Master. “I am convinced that keeper of Chesterton’s is a rascal. What a shocking run we had that day, George! I am sorry that fellow who was stopping with you—Ffrench, eh?—hadn’t a better experience with the Grately. What did he say to it?”

“He has gone back to Melton in disgust, sir. He says he can’t stand the hunting in these parts. He’s a crack man across country, is Ffrench.”

"I did not think much of his mount," said Mr. Welby, a little testily, "or of his riding either for that matter."

"It's the country, sir. The fox always runs in a circle about here. It's no test for a fellow's riding."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Welby. "It's not the country at all—and a fox is bound to come round;" and then ensued a little argument in which some of the other sporting guests joined; and George turned again to Esther.

"I hear Sir Emilius Isherwood called your uncle. But I am hanged if I understand the relationship. The whole thing seems topsy-turvy, like a dream. Is it possible that your father was his brother?"

"Yes," replied Esther; "we did not know his real name till he died. Hush! please; don't speak so loudly. My aunt is sitting near us, and Sir Emilius does not like me to talk of my father in general company."

Brand looked surprised, and then shut his lips as though upon reflection the scruple was evident enough to his understanding. It was not probable that Sir Emilius would care to own such a brother as Hagart.

"You live three miles away from here, don't you? I know Charles Isherwood; he is rather a

wild fellow, and went in for racing. Of course I know your uncle and aunt after a fashion too, for I was brought up in this county. My uncle, Lord Coniston, died last year, and I am going to live at Grately—if I can. It is like an incident in a play, Esther. Who would have dreamed of your being transformed into an Isherwood?"

Esther ate her roast mutton in silence.

"I suppose I may talk of the island?" continued George. "That month was the very happiest in my life. Nothing has come up to it since. And now that I am beside you again, it seems as though it had been yesterday. I can see you standing on the cliff, as I was rowed off to the steamer. Mousie, that was a fearful wrench to me. Some fellows mightn't have minded it much, but I felt as I was on the steamer going back to Sydney, that it would not have taken much more to make me drown myself. Well, I came back with the regiment to England, and I have been knocking about till quite lately, when I sold out of the army. We were quartered at Malta for a time. Perhaps that was how I missed your letters; and you—you heard nothing of me, I suppose?"

"How should I hear?" asked Esther with some bitterness. "One does not hear anything at school—when one is miserable, and eating one's heart out; it is then one loses hope."

"Were you very miserable, Mousie?" asked George, tenderly.

"Yes," said Esther; "but," she added slowly, "I have not been miserable for a long time; and I'd rather, please, that you did not call me—Mousie. I saw you once—"

"When? where?"

"At an exhibition of pictures—only for a moment. And then you drove away in a hansom. You looked well and happy."

"Esther!" exclaimed George, "I will call you Miss Isherwood if you like it better; but that sort of thing is a mockery between you and me. I see that you misjudge me; I have a great deal to say to you; I must say it by-and-by. There was my uncle—you *must* understand that. I could not go against him. As it is he has treated me infernally — but it is all different now."

The voices of Brand and of a cadaverous-looking young man, who had been enlightening Miss Golightly, the American, upon the doctrine of spiritualism, became disagreeably predominant in a lull of the conversation. George paused abruptly, but the spiritualist went on:

"Ah! Miss Golightly," he was saying, "it is a solemn thought that we are surrounded by myriads of invisible beings, who, did we but

recognize the fact, are striving to refine and elevate our gross natures."

"I guess I don't want be to elevated," exclaimed Miss Golightly, in alarmed nasal tones.

"It depends upon the nature of the elevating agent, eh Squire?" said the Rector, who, though he was long and spare, and wore bands, and was pronounced 'High Church,' liked his joke, touching his glass which the butler was refilling.

"Capital fellow, Lightner," whispered the Squire in an aside to Lady Isherwood. "Goes in for Saints' days and church decorations, and suits my wife down to the ground, but can stow away his bottle of port like a—layman. Gad, there are few laymen can do it as well. I always say, Rector, that there's a special dispensation granted to parsons in the matter of liquor. It don't get into their heads as it does into ours. Look at Prendergast, the man they say is to be our new Bishop. There is not such another cellar as his in Woodfordshire, and I don't know a better judge of claret, or one who has got through more hogsheads of it. But it don't seem to hurt him: go to him after dinner, and if you want a sound opinion about anything he'll give it you—short, but to the point."

"Prendergast listens," said Doctor Lightner, "but he never commits himself to anything

original. That's how a man acquires a reputation for wisdom; he looks solemn and holds his tongue, and his friends call him sound."

"Do you like my cousin Lina?" asked George, turning to Esther.

"I don't know; I can hardly tell; I think she is amusing.

"Yes, she is amusing, and she will have money. Do you recollect my talking to you about her, during our ride from the Pilot Station to Bully Wallah?—and now to see you dining together at the same table! I cannot understand how everything has changed with you. I may speak about your father now. Lady Isherwood is not listening. Why did he call himself Hagart?"

"I cannot tell you," replied Esther. "It is what I long to know, but they will not tell me; I may say this to you, for you know so much already."

"Of course I know," said Brand, "that he was what they call in Australia 'a bad hat.' I daresay that he got into a scrape in England. I believe," he added, suddenly, "that I know all about it. Was your father's name Robert?"

"Yes," replied Esther.

"I was looking over an old escritoire of my uncle's the other day, and I came across a packet

of private letters which he had evidently forgotten to destroy. I glanced at them from curiosity, and to see if there was anything I ought to keep—and there was one from Robert Isherwood which I burned after I had read it. It was a confession.”

“A confession!” Esther looked up breathless with anxiety to hear the revelation for which she had longed so deeply of late. Tell me what was in the letter; I ought to know what concerns my father—what must concern me, for I inherit his disgrace—if it was disgrace. No one has any right to keep me in ignorance.”

She spoke in deep agitation, and Bernard, furtively watching her from behind a bushy coleus plant, observed her tremulous eagerness, and wondered why she should look so imploringly at this stranger.

“I can’t tell you now,” said George. “See, the ladies are leaving the table. I am not sure that I ought to say anything. It is like betraying secrets, you know—I don’t know if it would be right. Well, if you really wish it, I’ll come to you in the drawing-room or the conservatory by-and-by. The conservatory is an awful jolly place. Lina and I often sit there; but I tell you I am not sure that I ought.”

“Surely,” said Esther, “I have a right to know what concerns me so closely.”

"After all, it was nothing so very dreadful," said George. "Plenty of fellows of good family have done the same thing—" He picked up Esther's fan which she had dropped in her agitation; and she became suddenly aware that Lina Welby, brushing by almost the last of the file, was looking at her curiously. Bernard too had risen, and was watching her keenly from beneath his horizontal brows.

Miss Welby linked her arm within that of Esther. "What do you think of George?" she asked, as they paused at the drawing-room door. "I wondered what you could be talking of. You looked as though you had forgotten where you were. Isn't he a dear, comforting boy?—and I always think he is so handsome; as sleek, and brown, and interesting-looking as a Dachshund puppy. I always tell him that is a most flattering comparison. Dachshunds are *too* sweet."

Fortunately Miss Welby never wanted an answer. "Come and sit beside me upon the sofa," she continued. "I have a quantity of things to say to you. Do you know that I shall be twenty-one in three weeks time? and Mammy has consented—no Saint's day interfering—to celebrate the occasion with a ball. It's rather a function, but it's amusing. You'll get a card in proper form to-morrow. George has been

helping me to fill them up. Don't you love dancing?"

"I have never been to a ball in my life," said Esther.

"Never!—been to a ball— Oh! you nice, unsophisticated person! You are too refreshing. I must tell George by-and-by. Mother, darling—only fancy, Miss Isherwood has never been to a ball in her life."

"Then I am sure," said Mrs. Welby, turning her velvety eyes away from Lady Isherwood and Mrs. P. Bramwell Golightly, to whom she had been uttering harmoniously-emphasised commonplaces, "that it will be too kind of dear Lady Isherwood to bring her to yours. Dear Lina is so excited about her ball," she added in a lower tone. "Her twenty-first birthday—such a fitting occasion for gathering our young friends about us—and with George here too. You noticed my nephew, dear Lady Isherwood. It is such a handsome expressive face; isn't it?"

Lady Isherwood assented, and Mrs. P. Golightly, who was strong-minded, and went in for the higher branches of female education, and entertained views upon physiological disparity as an important element in matrimony, remarked, that it was unfortunate Miss Welby and Captain Brand were both dark.

"Oh, dear Mrs. Golightly!" exclaimed Mrs. Welby, "that is quite premature. I assure you nothing has been even suggested."

"I suppose that you have not thought about the trousseau," said Lady Isherwood; "but I always think that for style there is no one to equal Léonie."

And then Mrs. Welby explained that Lina had shown no preference; that it had been the dear old Lord's wish; but that she, Mrs. Welby, thought an older and perhaps a more reliable husband would be better suited to one so gay and thoughtless as Lina. Girls are a sad anxiety," she added pathetically; "and I see, Mrs. Golightly, that you realize what a responsibility an attractive daughter is to a mother."

"I guess," said Mrs. Golightly, "that the responsibility of young people often lies with the hostesses as much as with the mothers. One can't tell who is going to be invited to a country house to meet one's daughters."

"I suppose a hostess is bound to provide eligibles," replied Mrs. Welby sweetly, "and there her responsibility ends. And Mr. Farquharson is a most excellent man—so interesting about those Roman antiquities—and there is a fine property."

"He squints," said Mrs. Golightly; "and I

guess I couldn't entertain that idea at any price. And he is always giving Amelia bits of pottery and old coins, and I guess I don't like it."

"I am afraid his heart is touched," said Mrs. Welby, sympathetically. "It is always a bad sign when men make presents of that kind. Lina had an admirer once, an antiquarian, or something of the sort. He had a passion for China, and would you believe it, dear Lady Isherwood, was perpetually giving her tea-pots? Poor darling! she couldn't quite refuse them, you know—tea-pots are not *quite* like anything else, and some of them were Nankin—but when it ended in a proposal and rejection, the tea-pots added to the awkwardness of the affair."

Meanwhile Miss Welby had gone to the piano, and was turning over duets with Frederica. Esther, thinking of George, had stolen into the conservatory and had seated her self in a fern-screened corner. By-and-by she saw the gentlemen filing in from the dining-room. Bernard was one of the first to enter; he looked thoughtful, and his lips twitched, a sure sign that he was discomposed, while his eyes took a rapid survey of the room, as if in search of some one — herself perhaps. Immediately behind Bernard came George, and Esther had an opportunity of observing how he appeared amongst

other men. He was flushed, and his eyes had a suspicious brightness, which attested the strength of Mr. Welby's port. There was a scarcely perceptible swagger in his walk, and he had a way of throwing back his head which seemed to indicate a conviction of the important place he occupied in the scale of creation. He resisted Miss Welby's smiling invitation to join the circle round the piano, and after looking round the room, and ascertaining Esther's absence, he made straight for the conservatory, where he placed himself upon a low-cushioned stool by her side.

"Sweetest," he murmured, "you don't know what a lovely picture you are now, with the drooping passion-flowers over your head, and that bank of fern and azalea as a background to your figure."

There was a suspicion of license in his tone, and he edged closer to her. Esther resented the broad compliment, and recoiled a little. "You promised to tell me what you knew about my father—the letter—"

"The letter!" repeated George, his eyes fixed upon her with open admiration. Oh, Robert Isherwood's letter to Lord Coniston! It is curious what threads link our destinies—that I should be the one to discover your father's crime. Do you really wish me to tell you what I learned

by chance? The knowledge can neither benefit nor harm you now that you are living with Sir Emilius. I don't suppose there is a soul in the county who remembers your father."

"It can," cried Esther. "It might affect my life deeply. You said that it was not a great crime. Perhaps ignorantly I may have magnified it in my imagination. If you can relieve my uncertainty, it will be more than kind of you to do so."

"How ceremoniously you talk! You speak as though I had never had any deeper interest in you than that of a stranger. What will you give me for my information?"

Esther drew back and half-rose from her chair; George's manner offended her. "Nay," he said, seeing that she shrank from him. "I was only joking. It is not much that I ask—only that flower that you are wearing."

She detached the blossom from her dress and held it towards him. George brushed it with his lips, and while she was burning with impatience played with it for a moment before he placed it in his button-hole. "Robert Isherwood and my uncle would appear to have been friends as young men. That was natural, as their homes adjoined, and I daresay they were at school or college together. I'll try and state the case as

shortly as I can. Robert Isherwood, who is apparently in disgrace with his own people, forges Lord Coniston's name. He writes appealing for mercy, and pleads stress of debt and an unfortunate connection in which he has involved himself, as an excuse. Circumstances, which I don't gather, render it impossible for my uncle to save his friend from disgrace. I fancy the matter has been taken out of his hands, and that he is powerless to act. Robert Isherwood is tried in a distant county, and, as I conclude, transported. I don't know anything more. The affair was, I imagine, hushed up, as I never heard of it, and I don't suppose any one else about here has done so. But for your words this evening, and the having so lately read that letter, I should not have connected you with Sir Emilius Isherwood's scapegrace brother."

Esther sat silent for several moments, her thoughts crowding round her own and her father's past, and connecting both with Bernard's words. This was indeed disgrace, as deep as any fraudulent bankruptcy. Her father had forged his friend's name, and had been transported. She was the daughter of a convict, and her limited experience of the world in Australia had taught her what a term of obloquy that was considered even there. How much worse to the

ideas of an Englishman with a keen sense of honour! Her whole being rose in dumb protest against the injustice of circumstance. Why should she be the child of a forger, a drunkard, a suicide? Why should she, who was innocent of evil thought, have inherited disgrace so manifold, while Frederica, a poor, struggling artist, was yet spotless in her lineage? Aunt Theodosia's pride of ancestry seemed no longer ludicrous and vulgar.

"Are you at home in the morning?" asked George suddenly.

Esther started. "What did you say?"

"Are you at home in the mornings?" he repeated; then added, struck by the pallor of her face—"Don't think any more about your father. I wish I had held my tongue; but how could I refuse what you begged so hard for? It is your own fault; I would not willingly have given you pain. Never mind, Mousie. I don't think any the worse of you because of your father's misfortunes. Esther," he said, taking her hand, "what has changed you? You are not soft and gentle as you used to be. In the old days you trembled and flushed when I spoke to you, or touched you. Now you are quite different. Surely you have not ceased to care for me? You are not so cruel as to blame me for not ruining my prospects, and

acting in defiance of my uncle? Why are you so reserved? I had pictured you, if we ever met again, coming to me with shy gladness—but you don't seem to care."

Esther drew her hand gently away. "I do care," she said brokenly. "I have cared far more than you could have done, but—I don't understand myself. Something seems to have hardened me. I have not wished to change, but I feel that I can never be again the old Esther of the island. It is the island Esther whom you want?"

"No," said George; "I don't care whether it is the island Esther or the English Esther. I want you. I want you to be kind to me as you were once."

"That is being the island Esther—and I cannot help shuddering when I think of that time. It is painful to me to recollect what happened. I—I gave myself to you so freely—I was so young, so ignorant. I gave you the right perhaps to—despise me—to treat me with freedom now."

"My sweet, innocent Esther!" said George. "Is that all that troubles you?"

"No," replied Esther. "If I felt the same towards you as I did then, I should not shrink from myself as I do. I should be true to the

past, as I know it is right to be—but it is—it is that I am not true.”

“Do you mean,” said George, “that you are engaged to another man?”

“No,” said Esther, still more brokenly; “I am not—I ought not—I shall never be engaged to another man.”

Her denial and agitation calmed George’s rising jealousy. Besides, it was not possible to believe seriously that any one could be preferred before himself.

“My darling!” he said tenderly, “don’t be angry with me for not being cold as you are. *I* have not changed, nor have you in reality, I am convinced. You are excited and upset now by our sudden meeting. A great alteration has come over your life since we parted. You hardly know what you feel. You are a little ashamed of your past life, and you judge yourself by an English standard; but there is nothing for which you need blush. I won’t frighten or press you. You were always a timid, uncertain, little thing. Do you remember, dearest, the storm at Bully Wallah?”

It seemed to Esther that to discuss the past, under present conditions, was impossible. To admit that she remembered all those sweet, bygone emotions was to admit that they had

been genuine, and to aggravate her fickleness and falsity. "Don't let us talk of that time," she said imploringly; "I can't bear it now."

"I will not if it pains you," answered George. "I will not say or do anything that you dislike, Esther."

The last words were loud enough to be audible to any one standing near, and at that moment there was a rustle against the leaves of a bushy fern that screened Esther and George from observation by the occupants of the drawing-room, and Bernard and Frederica appeared in the archway. There was a grim, angry look in Bernard's mouth and eyes, and had not his companion advanced, and so pulled him forward, he would have turned back into the drawing-room. Frederica glanced from one to the other surprised at the excited eagerness in Brand's face, and the agitation in that of Esther.

"Esther," she said, "Lady Isherwood has sent me to look for you."

Esther rose, and linking her arm within that of her friend, returned with her to the drawing-room.

"This is a jolly place to sit in, especially at night, when it is lighted up with these coloured lamps," said George to Bernard in an affable tone, which caused the latter to wish that it were

sometimes permissible to kick one's undeclared enemies in the conservatories of one's acquaintances.

Soon afterwards the party broke up, and the Isherwoods' drive home was enlivened by Sir Emilius' snores, and Lady Isherwood's wrathful tones, as she scolded her niece for carrying on so barefaced a flirtation with Captain Brand.

"I never saw anything so shameless in my life. There you were sitting alone with him in a corner of the conservatory from the time the gentlemen came in from the dining-room till a few minutes before we left the house. And he is as good as engaged to Lina—Mrs. Welby said so; and a wild, dissipated young man, who would go any lengths with a girl. It would surprise me if you were ever asked to dine at Allerton again; and it is such a pleasant house, and gives one such an excellent opportunity of wearing one's London dresses, which get so shabby lying by in the country. Pray, may I ask had you ever seen Captain Brand before?"

"I knew him long ago in Australia, Aunt Hermione," replied Esther, constrained by the direct question to truthfulness.

"In Australia!" cried Lady Isherwood. "I don't believe a word of it. You only say so to excuse your conduct. What should Captain

Brand have been doing in Australia? I don't like Australia; it is a place where people learn nothing but bad manners.

The carriage stopped before Lady Isherwood had finished her tirade. Bernard got down and rang the bell; Sir Emilius lighted his candle in the hall and went to bed. Lady Isherwood continued her lecture, regardless of Bernard's presence, till he interrupted her angrily.

"That will do, Hermione; you are keeping Miss Talmadge up; and if Esther has done anything wrong, you have scolded her sufficiently."

"*If* Esther has done anything wrong," cried Lady Isherwood. "If you are going to take her part, I shall say nothing more. Perhaps you approve of young women flirting, and making themselves conspicuous."

"I don't like to see young women made conspicuous in any fashion," said Bernard, shortly.

"Bernard," shrieked Lady Isherwood, "you are dropping the wax upon my gown. Give Frederica her candle at once."

Frederica took it from his hand, and went up-stairs. Lady Isherwood followed her, still scolding Bernard for his carelessness, and he and Esther were left standing in the hall together. He lit her candle, and deliberately placed it again upon the table.

“Esther!” he said in a hard determined voice, “I had intended to make an opportunity of speaking to you privately this evening, but till now you have given me none. Something in your manner the night before I went to London made me doubtful where I had felt almost certain. I shall go away to-morrow unless you tell me to stay.”

Esther stood silent, and taken aback. She realized that her fate was in her hands, and that to-night she must decide between herself and Bernard for ever. The determined way in which he spoke compelled her admiration, while it made her task doubly hard. He would indulge in no sentimental appeals—of that she felt certain, and she esteemed him for his proud reserve. Her love for Bernard was too far removed from her girlish infatuation for Brand, for demonstration to be to her taste. Even his passion—she knew instinctively that it was there—smouldering, as it were, beneath his cold demeanour, would not carry him where he had not meant to go, and might, by any paltering with truth on her part, be easily turned to resentment. He would have no half-measures. All the good-fellowship of their intercourse, the kindness and sympathy apart from deeper, personal interest, that he had shown her, would go for nought. Either they must be all

to each other or less than nothing. If she were to send him away to-night they could meet as friends no more. She had the alternative of complete confession of her circumstances and feelings—but that would be throwing upon him the whole cost and burden of decision—another mental struggle against the “might have beens”—and there was nothing in his face or manner to invite confidence.

“Well,” he said with grim impatience, that broke out of the constraint he had placed upon himself; “there is not much need for consideration. Am I to go or stay to-morrow?”

Esther looked up at him with deep, imploring eyes.

“Oh, what can I say, Bernard!—what can I say?”

“If you have any doubt in your mind as to your reply,” said Bernard, with hard decision, “that is enough. It is simply a question of what you desire. I will not stoop to plead. If you wished me to remain there would be no hesitation in your manner of bidding me do so. It is a fault of mine, I know, to be over-confident; but a few days ago I should not have expected to see in you doubt and indecision as to your feeling towards me. There shall be no doubt between me and the woman I love, so I am

answered plainly. After what I saw and heard to-night I understand better the change in you. Perhaps you will reply truthfully to two questions, and then I will detain you no longer. Did you give the flowers from your breast to that man with whom you were sitting in the conservatory this evening?"

Esther stood silent, with her eyes downcast. The veiled contempt in his tone, hurt her keenly.

"You don't answer—I beg your pardon—I have asked an impertinent question."

"I—I gave them," faltered Esther.

"One more;—you remember the winter exhibition of pictures at Burlington House, two years ago; was it Captain Brand the sight of whom agitated you so painfully then?"

"Yes," replied Esther.

"Thank you," said Bernard, in the same rasping manner. "I won't trouble you any more; I shall go away to-morrow before you are up, and we shall probably not meet again for some time."

"Bernard," cried Esther, in child-like despair; but he was not even looking at her, and did not appear to have heard her. He took a few steps towards the other end of the room, and this turning of his back upon her faint appeal, seemed to her to indicate an utter insensibility to her pain. Had he shown the least sign of

tenderness she must have approached him, and told him what was in her heart. She would have thrown upon him the burden of decision. Frederica and her love and suffering were almost forgotten at the moment. They were all human beings, with hearts and passions. Why should one be sacrificed for the good of another? As for that self-raised barrier, it would be well, at least, to give him the choice between his love and his theory of duty. . . . But he looked so stern and impassive; his mouth never trembled, nor did his eyes turn upon her with a softening glance. Perhaps his egotism was more acutely wounded than his heart. Surely if he felt deeply he would show some sign of suffering.

"Bernard," she said again, in a last, desperate effort; "it is for you that I care—for you that I mind."

Bernard turned this time, and came a step nearer. He could not blind himself to the pain in her face.

"Good-bye, Esther," he said, holding out his hand. "I understand what you feel; you mind for me—because you think that you are causing me suffering. You mind—because your conscience smites you a little. It is like a woman's inconsistency; but I thank you for the impulse. Good-bye; I am going to work now, and I will

scrunch the rest out. Don't reproach yourself; it will not mend matters. I won't wish you happiness in the future; if you are going to be happy, you will be so, and no platitudes from me will make any difference either way."

He walked firmly away towards the smoking-room, closing the door behind him with almost a bang. The tapestry *portière* fell over it, and seemed to Esther to resemble the barrier that divided their lives.

She heard the smoking-room bell ring, heard Bernard give directions to Parkins for the dog-cart to take him to the station early the next morning, and then ask for a glass of brandy. By that sign alone did she know that he was moved, for it was not a habit of his to take stimulants. He rather piqued himself upon his abstinence, and despised men who enjoyed their after-dinner potations. He was full of fads about eating, drinking, and exercise, and Esther almost smiled to herself as the thought crossed her mind that he would probably make hard work, pedestrianism, and spare diet counter-irritants against disappointment.

Esther took up her candle, and went weary and hopeless to her own room. At the door, Frederica, her eyes bright with excited interest, her long, fair hair falling over her pink flannel dressing-gown, met her.

“Esther, I have been listening for you ; what a long time you stayed down-stairs. I won’t keep you a moment, for you look quite over-done. How horrid it was of Lady Isherwood to scold you ; but then she could not know. I felt certain, when you said you had known him in Australia. I have been on thorns all the evening since I was told his name, and after what I heard in the conservatory—I was sure then almost. Oh, Esther ! dear Esther ! was it—is it George ?”

“Yes ; it is George.”

“I knew you would meet again,” exclaimed Frederica triumphantly ; “I felt it. There is a fate that brings people together who are fond of one another ;” and she blushed as she spoke. “He cares for you as much as ever ; no one could help seeing it in his face. Dear, dearest Esther, I am so glad, and now you will be happy at last.”

It seemed to Esther at the moment that this misunderstanding of all her motives and feelings—this crediting her with a loyalty that she did not possess—this utter failure to see what she was suffering—was harder to bear than all the pain of renunciation. She allowed Frederica to kiss her, with a bitter feeling in her heart for which she hated herself directly afterwards, but which kept her from returning the embrace. She answered

nothing ; it did not seem worth while to speak. Why deepen the false impression ? why try to remove it ? It was better that the mists of misconception should not be cleared away.

She went to bed, but not to spend the night in uncontrollable weeping, as we are led to believe is common with heroines when the lights are out, and the day's tragedy played. I doubt whether a weak woman, who has come somewhat mentally bruised out of a crisis in her life, has often energy for violent emotion.

Esther lay down, and after a little while slept. Her slumbers were scarcely even troubled, for she dreamed that her mother was with her, as that guardian spirit had often been, when the poor girl had huddled herself up in her little bed, broken down physically and mentally by her father's drunken violence. A tender voice seemed to be saying to her : " I will teach her so that fidelity shall be the ruling principle of her life. I will teach her to renounce everything that seems sweeter than duty. . . . The sweetness cannot remain—there must always be a curse with it, and the curse clings till death. . . . "

CHAPTER XI.

GEORGE BRAND BECOMES A SUITOR.

FREDERICA looked a little sorrowful and pre-occupied for several days after Bernard's departure ; but there was sufficient harrowing uncertainty as to his feelings, in her mind, to make her acknowledge to herself, that in the present crisis of affairs his absence was partly a relief. She worked diligently at her painting, shirking topics which bore upon herself ; and there was indeed small encouragement for her to discuss personal matters with her friend, for whenever she approached tentatively the subject of Bernard's abrupt withdrawal, or openly that of Captain Brand's advances, Esther shrank as though she were probing a painful wound.

Frederica could not help remarking that Esther looked worn and miserable, but she attributed the girl's dejected manner and pale cheeks to suspense and uncertainty as to the state of Captain Brand's heart. Frederica herself entertained no doubt upon the matter, and felt

certain that the love story would end with, "They lived happy ever after;" but then, to be sure, Esther had not the quick, impartial vision of a disinterested spectator, and must necessarily be agitated by anxiety and expectation.

In truth, poor Esther had altered strangely, and looked so hopeless and unhappy that her changed appearance must have been commented upon by any household less obtuse than that of Barwold. As it was, Sir Emilius was engrossed by his preparations for the private publication of the 'Family Chronicle.' Lady Isherwood had begun to work a chair-cover in crewels after a design of Frederica's, was in full correspondence with Leonie upon the subject of her dress for the Allerton Ball, and was moreover in deep anxiety about the health of Bijou, who threatened to follow Floss into an untimely grave; and Frederica had her private theory upon the matter, and was occupied with her work and her own heart troubles.

Esther read diligently to Lady Isherwood every morning, held her aunt's crewel skeins, attended upon Bijou, walked and drove as usual; and none noticed her absent manner, and lack of interest in her employment, or her sudden flushings and startings whenever the door bell rang or the footman entered with letters.

Miss Welby brought Captain Brand over to call at Barwold two or three days after the Allerton dinner party.

“You nice romantic person,” she said, enthusiastically, to Esther. “I always say to mother, that getting intimate with one’s neighbours is like pinching a Sally Lunn, there is nothing but dough and fluff; but with you, the better one knows you the more interesting one finds you. I was awfully puzzled at the earnest way in which you and George talked together the other evening, but he has explained to me that he knew you years ago in Australia, when his regiment was quartered there. I have been trying to make him tell me all about you, and the sort of life you led, but all I could get out of him was, that you lived upon an island that was almost uninhabited. I never heard of anything so truly delicious and Robinson Crusoeish. I said to mother, ‘Mammy, darling, why didn’t you send me out to Australia and have me brought up on an island?—perhaps then I should have been interesting, and unlike other people, instead of the commonplace frump that I am.’”

“We are very dull at Allerton now,” continued Miss Welby. “The social atmosphere is as heavy as pease-pudding in a pot nine days old. That’s a saying I heard in the village the other day—please don’t think me vulgar. Mrs. P.

Bramwell Golightly has taken fright at Mr. Farquharson's attentions, and has insisted upon returning all the broken bits of pottery and petrified foxes' bones that he showered upon Amelia. He has gone back to his excavations, and Mrs. Golightly has carried Amelia off to the house of a lord, where there is an eldest son with a fair Apollo-like cast of countenance and hyacinthine curls, which she affirms to be the correct physiological contrast to Amelia's black fringe and *retroussé* nose. Miss Golightly glances disconsolately at a mummy-like photograph of her adorer which she has contrived to retain, and says in a melancholy tone: 'I guess I don't want to be paired like a Dresden figure.' George is going over to Grately to shoot, and then I don't know how I shall exist; but the dear boy is planning a pheasant shooting-party, with ladies; and I believe he is going to talk to Lady Isherwood about it."

George acted with more diplomacy than might reasonably have been expected from his boy-like impatience of disposition; first of all securing Lady Isherwood's co-operation in the Grately scheme—like a child, she could not resist the prospect of pleasure—and then devoting himself to Frederica, while Lina talked to Esther.

"I think he is so nice, dear," said Frederica

afterwards to Esther. "So good-tempered and agreeable. Perhaps not quite the sort of person I should have expected you to fall in love with ; but then he is so handsome, and people always marry their opposite in character."

This was Frederica's way of surmounting the dissimilarity of tastes and disposition, which, regarded from a psychological point of view, would have delighted Mrs. Golightly. George had a way of skimming over the surface of things which impressed the world at large with a sense of his pliability and easy benevolence. And then his manners were so adaptable, and his smile so winning ; and as one grew accustomed to his face and conversation, the faint repulsion they occasionally excited passed completely away.

Esther felt grateful to George for respecting her reserve, and abstaining from any sign of a mutual understanding. Though quietly attentive to her, he was careful not to extinguish, by any abrupt demonstration, her flickering regard. His passion for Esther had been inflamed by her evident repugnance upon their first meeting, and had revived with such fresh force as to make him timid and prudent in his advances. Not that he anticipated the least difficulty in winning her. He was accustomed to believe himself irresistible, and was on the

whole disposed to consider himself a fine, disinterested fellow, for being willing to waive the questions of want of fortune and tarnished descent. He did not consider these drawbacks except superficially, and as arguments in the balance of his wishes. He was not given to such nice calculations as those involved in the adjustment of desire to circumstance. To want a thing was in his estimation sufficient warrant for having it. Regret, or the adaptability of the coveted object to his particular needs, spiritual or material, might come later, and would probably be then accompanied by conviction, the result of disagreeable experience, that he might have done better. In that case some one must clearly be to blame, and the scapegoat certainly not himself.

The Grately party was fixed for the week preceding Christmas, and the Allerton ball was arranged to take place early in January. Frederica had now been nearly two months at Barwold, and proposed returning to Magenta Terrace immediately after Miss Welby's party. Her musical powers caused her to be somewhat sought after in society, and both the Isherwoods and Captain Brand had been eager in entreating her to remain for the two pieces of gaiety.

During the next ten days George made frequent excuses for visiting Barwold. Either

Lina wished to practise duets with Frederica, and required an escort; or Lady Isherwood must see specimens of a famous breed of toy-terriers, one of which was destined to replace the now defunct Bijou; or the Grately library boasted an antique volume; or there was a rare print which must receive the seal of authenticity from Sir Emilius' well-known judgment; or the hounds met near Barwold; or the run ended on that side of the county, and "a cup of tea," or, be it confessed, a draught of whisky and seltzer, before joining the ladies, "was so jolly after a long day's ride."

One day, riding over from Allerton, he met Esther pacing the avenue alone. He dismounted, and slipping his bridle over his arm, joined her in her walk.

"As solitary as ever," he said; "do you remember how fond you were upon the island of roaming about alone?"

"I am afraid that it is my nature to be solitary," answered Esther. "I cannot remember the time when the outside world quite satisfied me."

"Oh, that is because you have always led such a dull life, and are fond of reading and that sort of thing," said George, with one of those smiles that invariably made Esther realize, in a greater or less degree, upon what opposite poles of thought they took their respective stands.

"I often wish that I could sit down to a book and rejoice in imaginary things—people that never existed, facts that never took place. I am always intensely bored unless I have something definite to look forward to. I have heard Lina say the same thing; but I suppose that women are different. I hate having no pleasure in prospect. Just now I'm longing to show you Grately."

"Why?" asked Esther. "It is a big, fine place, isn't it?—but I don't know much about grand, old houses."

"Nor I," said George. "Frankly, I am a perfect ass about antiquities. They bore me; I detest old things. That is one of the points Lina and I are agreed upon."

Esther could not help smiling. "Do you always belie yourself in that way? It was only the other day I heard you emphatically assuring Sir Emilius that if there was one thing in the world you loved better than old China it was old pictures."

"Oh, a fellow can't always be responsible for his words. I daresay you heard me telling Miss Talmadge that I adored the grand opera. To tell the truth, I always go to sleep except when Patti or one of the swells is singing. I like jolly music though, like *The Sorcerer*, or *Madame Angot*. But," he continued, "it is not from

the architectural or decorative point of view that I am anxious for you to admire Grately. I want you to like it well enough to feel glad that it is to be your home." He uttered the last words with a glance half-audacious, half-beseeching, towards her averted face.

"It will never be my home, Captain Brand."

"Yes, it will—when we are married. I don't want to hurry you, or bother you, but I am determined that you shall be my wife. I know that I can make you happy."

The confident tone in which he spoke made Esther turn towards him with that longing to trust herself to the judgment of the man, which a doubtful woman always feels.

"Do you really think so?" she asked, shyly.

"Of course," replied George. "What is to prevent us from being completely happy? I would do everything that you wished, and you would be sure to like Grately. The worst of it is, that it is such a huge place to keep up. It was an abominable shame of my uncle to leave it to me without a large enough income to enable me to live there properly. I suppose the old man thought that I should have Lina Welby's money."

"Why not marry your cousin, George, and remove the difficulty?"

"I would in a moment if you and she could

change places. Lina is a very jolly girl, though she is rather a pocket-Venus ; and I never cared much for little women. I did think of her as a wife, but as soon as I saw you again I knew that it could never be. You are the only girl I have ever loved in that way, and I mean to marry you, darling."

"You don't consider your cousin's feelings—"

"I don't think Lina has much feeling," said George, with a little tone of pique. "She only cares about flirting. She was teasing me about you the other day, and I as good as told her that I was fond of you."

"George," said Esther, "do you think it is right for a woman to marry a man if she does not love him ?"

"If you mean that you don't love me, I'm not afraid of risking that."

"It seems to me," said Esther, "that it is the one thing to be afraid of."

"You loved me two years ago," exclaimed George.

"Yes," said Esther ; "I must have loved you then."

"I don't believe that it is possible for a girl to change so utterly in so short a time. Either you were only pretending to love me then, or you do care for me now, though you will not own it."

"It is my shame not to love you," said Esther very low.

"Dearest," said George, "you exaggerate all these feelings. That was always your way. One never quite knows how to take you. Don't hesitate any longer, dear Esther, but look at me and say frankly, 'George, I will be your wife.'"

"I cannot say that," replied Esther, "unless I forget the two years during which we have been parted."

"You are angry with me for not having sought you. It is unjust to blame me. I thought I had explained all that. You know I was not my own master, and when I came to England it seemed so improbable that we should meet again. But you must feel satisfied that, in spite of everything, I have always loved you. And I have never released you from your engagement. Do you not remember your promise, that no matter what happened in the future, you would belong to me, and to no one else? I claim you now."

"You forget that you have tacitly released me," said Esther. "You would never have reminded me of my promise had you not met me accidentally at Allerton. You have given me to understand that you would have married Miss Welby, or another girl, without thinking of my existence."

"That was because I had given up all hope of

ever meeting you again. Having seen you once more, I feel that it would be quite impossible for me to marry any one else."

"And then," said Esther, slowly, "there is another thing. I have no right to bring upon you, or upon any other man, the shame of my father's dishonour."

"Oh, as to that," exclaimed George, "I suppose that, knowing all the circumstances, I am at liberty to judge for myself. It does not alter my feelings. I don't say," he added, "that it might not have made a difference if we had met now for the first time. As it is, I love you too deeply to allow any consideration of that kind to come between us."

"You are very generous," said Esther.

"It isn't generosity," replied George, in a tone which implied that he was fully alive to his disinterestedness. "Mousie," he exclaimed with sudden vehemence, "what can you want? Surely you can require nothing more than love and fidelity. Let the old sweetness come back again. It is not a fresh thing; it is but renewing the past. I only ask you to be true to yourself."

He advanced his arm, as though he would have drawn her to him, but Esther shrank back.

"I want to be true," she cried, in an agitated voice. "Can you not see that I am struggling against myself? I want to be sure that I owe

myself to you. I know how hard it is to be denied what we long for. If I am your happiness, I would belong to you if I could. When we cannot make our own joy, we can at least sometimes make that of others — but I want to think. I want to be sure that it is right.”

George did not press his desire to embrace her, though she looked tempting enough as she turned her agitated face, coloured by the wintry walk, full upon him. He let his arm drop by his side, and vented his discomfiture upon his horse by pulling angrily at the beast’s bridle. “Very well,” he said. “I won’t worry or annoy you, since you mean to keep me at a distance, but do not let me be long in suspense. Try and make up your mind to what I wish. Will you promise that, Esther?”

“I will try.”

“It is hard upon me,” he continued, “when I am ready to do everything for you that you wish. When I am willing to give—” He was going to say, “Give up so much for your sake,” but checked himself. “Esther, I put a ring on your finger when we parted. Have you got it? Will you wear it again now?”

“I have it,” she said colouring, “but I could not—I have not been able to wear it.”

“Let me see you with it on at Grately, Esther, to please me.”

At that moment they reached the house, and she entered it without saying yes or no to his request.

The more Esther pondered upon her position the more strongly it seemed borne in upon her, that since George wished her to marry him she must do so. All the strongest cords of her nature seemed to bind her into passive obedience to his will. She had given herself to him without a moment's hesitation when she had been a lonely, ignorant child, yearning for love, and looking upon the young handsome stranger as a demi-god, specially favoured by her mother, and sent expressly by the higher powers for her comfort. There still lingered a shadow of the old glamour, and though his divinity was now less patent to her understanding, all the loyalty of her disposition bade her be true to the early impression. Then, too, the solitariness of her young bringing-up had deepened every influence that had ever been brought to bear upon her character into an almost compelling power; and all those influences combined in George's favour. Affection had always been so precious to her, and gratitude was the feeling that had ever swayed her most strongly. She was thankful to George for loving her, and she could not but be touched by the generosity, which overlooked her want of fortune and the taint of her descent, and she had strong within her that moral chastity and

shrinking from infidelity, which is more or less present with every enthusiastic, pure-minded woman.

She had drifted unconsciously into love for Bernard, but it was love of that kind which rather caused her soul to yearn for his sympathy and companionship than her heart for his devotion. The very nature of her love seemed to bid her sacrifice it to an ideal standard of right. What he had done she could do. It was incumbent upon her to emulate his high-mindedness. And then she told herself that to call her renunciation a voluntary sacrifice was claiming too much for it. Bernard would never marry her if he knew her father's history. By-and-by perhaps he would marry Frederica; and thus two people, if not a third, would be made happy at the cost of her own problematical pain.

Poor Esther! If the giving up of individual desire be indeed the truest source of content, she was young to arrive at the conclusion; nevertheless, so she reasoned in a groping fashion, and when the time came for the visit to Grately, she took out George's ring, which had been carefully locked up in her desk, and sealed her fate by placing it upon her finger. George noticed it the evening of their arrival, but except that he looked flushed and elated, he wisely forbore to press his advantage, and did not even force his

attentions upon Esther, devoting himself rather to Lina Welby.

Miss Welby was quick-sighted enough to have seen long since how matters stood, and had sufficient cleverness to abdicate her position without the smallest loss of dignity. Her vanity might perhaps have been wounded by George's defection, but she was far too volatile to have been seriously hurt, and had at the moment another admirer in tow, who had the charm of novelty to recommend him. She made a point of laughing openly at the family scheme of matrimony, and contrived to impress Woodfordshire in general with the belief that she had good-naturedly refused her cousin, and that partly in pique he had turned to Esther.

Grately Park was a large mansion of grey stone, half Elizabethan, half nondescript, like many of the other family seats in Woodfordshire. It was built in a quadrangle, which made it appear larger than it was, and was rather a show place in the county, having a staircase by which Queen Bess was said to have ascended, and an historic gateway, and fine painted ceilings. It had a banqueting-hall, and a traditionary ghost; but the reception and living rooms were in a modern wing of the house, and the old part was falling to decay, while under the present owner there appeared no likelihood of its restoration. George

had no aptitude for the equation of antiquarian aspirations with free, modern expenditure, and was far from having solved the problem of how Grately—Elizabethan and Victorian—was to be maintained suitably upon an income of less than four thousand per annum. A property suffered to fall into neglect during the latter reign of an hypochondriacal and uninterested sovereign, was not likely to be improved by a new owner, who had extensive ambition in the matters of a hunting stud, and game preserving, and an inadequate income, and back debts. But though George had drains of several kinds upon his purse, the matter did not seem to trouble him to any serious extent ; he talked of the improvements he meant to make, and with the ostentation of humility depreciated the hot-houses and vineries, and found fault with the stabling, in a manner that savoured of swagger.

“ You had better have had a try for my fortune,” said Lina Welby, one day ; “ though I think you were wise to take up another line, for of course you know that I would not have accepted you ; but, seriously, you will never be able to live here comfortably on your income.”

“ You know nothing about it, Lina.”

“ Oh yes, I do ; I know how far money goes with you, and I know more than she does,” nodding at Esther. “ What made Uncle Con-

iston so angry with you before he died?"

"How can I tell?"

"I am sure that you can. I heard that you had been leading a fast life, you bad boy; and he had just got an inkling of it. I think it is wonderful that you wicked creatures ever find women silly enough and trustful enough to have you. The more I see of life the more firmly I am convinced of the badness of men. They do well enough to flirt with, but for husbands! I am convinced that if I ever marry, it will be some straitlaced Ritualistic clergyman with bands and a tonsure."

"Parsons are the worst of the lot," answered George, laughing; "and though you talk so much about the parish, Lina, it is not any more in your line than severe virtue is in mine."

"George," said Lina, "there are different kinds of virtue. As I say sometimes to mother, 'Darling mother, it's not the bad people in this world that make me feel wicked all over; it's the good ones.' There is a sort of Brand's concentrated essence of priggish virtue that is intolerable, but there is a fat, tolerative, easy-going goodness that is particularly comforting when you get hold of it, and that is what I mean to go in for."

The party at Grately lasted four days, and was voted by every one extremely pleasant. Bachelors' entertainments usually are. The

gentlemen shot in the daytime, and the ladies joined them at luncheon in the keeper's cottage, or some such rural refuge from wind and weather, where hot stew, and cold fricandeau, and sherry, and champagne, in unlimited quantities, gave more satisfaction than those comestibles could have afforded if partaken of in the stately dining-room. Upon the return from the coverts, the ladies would clothe themselves in becoming tea-gowns, and congregate in the hall where there was always a huge log alight, and abundance of tea and buttered toast. The elders would make up quartettes of whist, and the younger ones would cluster round the piano, while Frederica Talmadge played dreamy airs by Schumann and quaint sonatas of Mozart, or Miss Welby sang lively French songs.

Dinner would follow, and perhaps more music, or a round game, or dancing. It was all pleasant. Frederica thought, that but for the lack of one element essential to her perfect happiness, there was nothing left to be desired, and sometimes reflected sadly upon the sordid contrast that Magenta Terrace would shortly present to all this grandeur.

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